



UK Election Analysis 2019: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:

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This is now the fifth Election Analysis report we have produced in a little over four years. Upon embarking on this project in 2015, little did we know we would be about to encounter the most turbulent, unpredictable and remarkable periods of UK political history. For us, it has been a thrilling, fascinating, and often exhausting ride. Now, with a thumping majority in the House of Parliament, the Conservative Party will govern for the next five years, giving us a well-earned break from this project... at least where UK elections are concerned!

It has been a privilege to share this journey with the contributors to these reports: many of whom we know well, and many of whom we have met through this collaboration. In 2019 we had the unique challenge of a snap election and a December election, which pushed our contributors at one of the busiest periods of the academic year. As always, we are immensely grateful for their enthusiasm, commitment and their expertise, which shine through the pages of this report.

On behalf of the editorial team we would like to recognise the financial and moral support of the Centre Comparative Politics and Media Research at Bournemouth University, and our great colleagues and student community. We are also very grateful to the Political Studies Association Media and Politics Group for their ongoing support of these reports, and of the fantastic network of PSA scholars who contribute.

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Finally, a special thanks to our friends and family, in particular: Liz, Bec, Teresa and Alex.

Merry Christmas!

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Introduction



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On 23 July 2019 Boris Johnson's became leader of the Conservative Party, meaning the man who had led the campaign towards Brexit was now to be in charge of its delivery. His first short term as Prime Minister may be remembered for him losing the most votes of any UK Prime Minister, being found to have illegally prorogued Parliament, in doing so misleading the Queen. But he also succeeded in spearheading a renegotiation of the agreement by which Britain would leave the EU, removing the 'Irish backstop' that ardent Brexiteers argued locked the UK forever under EU control. Yet there was little chance of this deal getting through Parliament. After a Conservative backbench rebellion in September 2019 to prevent a no-deal exit from the EU Johnson expelled 21 of his own MPs, he had no majority at all. The partners in a supply and demand agreement, the DUP, withdrew support due to the likelihood of a formal border between Northern Ireland and the UK. The rest of Parliament arraigned against him.

Despite calls from within his own party for Labour to oppose Johnson's call for a general election, Corbyn succumbed. The result was a thumping win for Johnson's Conservatives with an 80 seat majority, the largest since 1987. Labour fell to its worst showing since 1935. But this was not a ringing endorsement for Johnson, his personal approval ratings were a net -14% on the eve of the election, rarely having a positive rating. Corbyn however had net approval ratings of -30%, Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson -44% and Brexit's Farage -36%. The result of this battle of unpopular political leaders was the Conservatives vote share increased only by 1.2%, Labour's fall of 7.9% being the significant statistic. Increases for the Liberal Democrats of 4.2% and the Brexit Party's 2% put paid to Labour's chances in many seats. Johnson won 56.2% of seats from 43.6% of the votes. 45.6% voted for parties standing clearly on a platform to Brexit, raising some questions about the mandate that Johnson enjoys despite his now iron grip on his party and Parliament. The somewhat equivocal actual vote shares of course cannot take into account tactical votes.

This election has raised countless questions and talking points, which pollsters, journalists, academics, commentators and politicians alike are all busy analysing. This project, and report that follows, is our collective contribution to making sense of the 2019 election. To do this, we have again turned to leading academics in the UK and beyond – a mix of world-leading experts and early career researchers – to offer their reflections, analysis and early research findings on the election campaign.

For election analysts, the talking points of this campaign offered continuities from recent campaigns but will also be remembered for the central role of truth and lying in electoral politics. Accordingly, we devote **Section 1** to discussions

of the (increasingly uncivil) nature of political discourse during this campaign, the role of misinformation, lies, and the possible consequences for our civic culture.

In **Section 2** we turn to voters, polls and results. After a run of difficult elections for pollsters, it seems that 2019 was a better year, with most of them performing well. Turnout, however, was marginally down from 2017, and the supposed 'youthquake' of 2017 failed to decisively turn the election this time. Nevertheless, the generational divide between young and older voters is increasingly evident and may shape future elections to come.

Much debate centred on the nations (**Section 3**). Would Scotland deliver a further boost to the SNP and the campaign for independence? How would Northern Ireland respond to the uncertainty of relations with the Republic, the rest of the UK and the EU post-Brexit? Would Wales reject Labour and would England's red wall hold up? The election outcome leaves the future of the union in serious question in the coming years.

Sections 4 and 5 draw attention to the campaign strategies the parties pursued and their policy platforms. Here, unlike 2017, Brexit did appear to significantly shape the election outcome, and was the central pillar of the Conservatives' campaign. As in 2017, Labour tried to shift discussion to ending austerity and investment in public services, but this time it failed to resonate in ways that shifted voting behaviour.

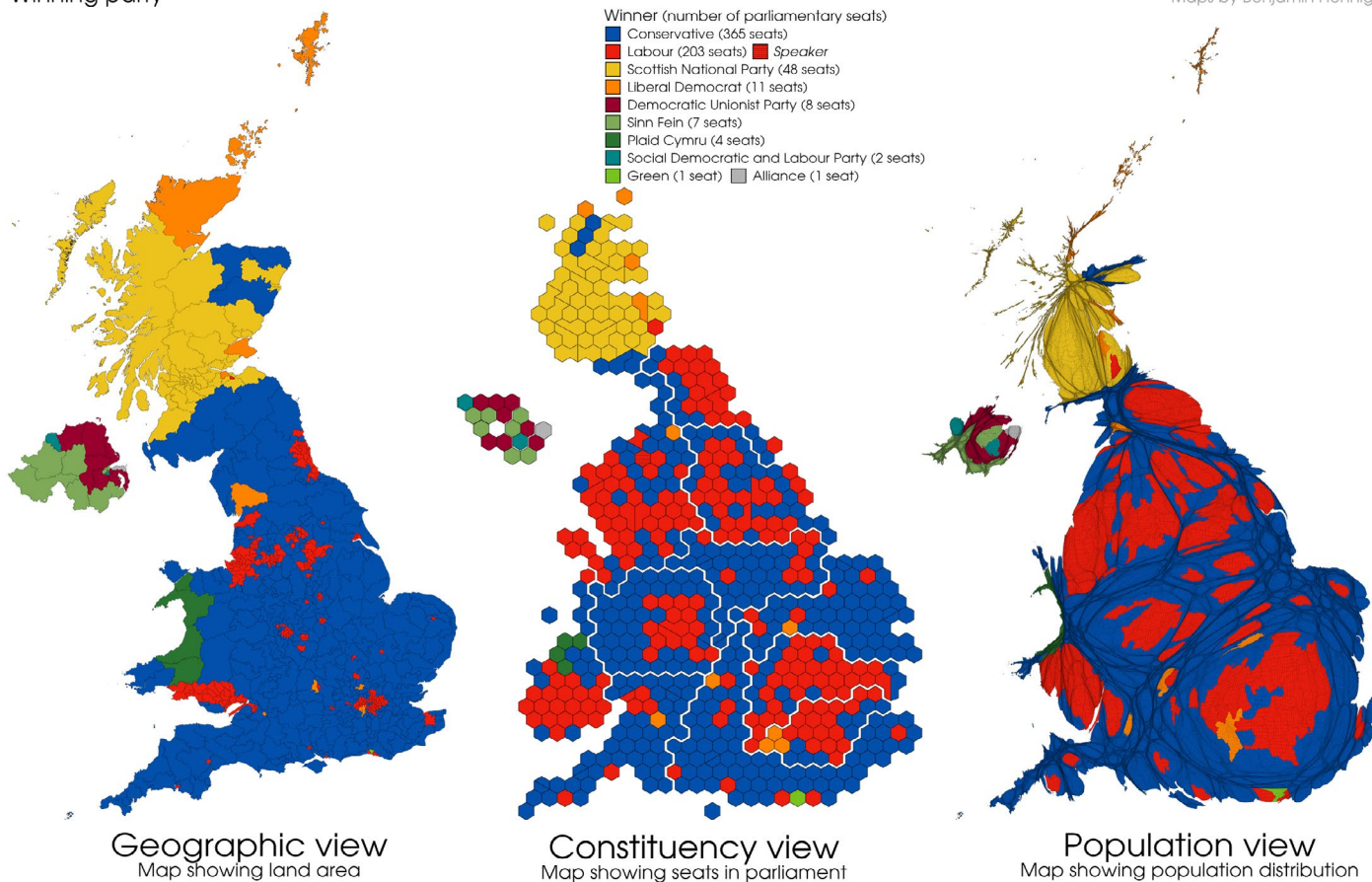
Digital (**Section 6**) was a major battleground, with Full Fact's finding that 88% of Conservative Facebook adverts online contained at least some misleading information a stark warning of the dangers that this space poses to democracy. Relatedly, news and journalism (**Section 7**) came under fire continuously. 2019 saw a record number of televised leader debates. While they are finally now a central staple of election communication in the UK, their formats and organisation are still work in progress. Meanwhile, the right-leaning press intensified its assault from 2017 on Jeremy Corbyn.

Finally, in **Section 8** we capture perhaps one of the most interesting dynamics of the election: the interplay between politics and popular culture and the role personality played in the outcome.

Published within ten days of the result, these contributions are short and accessible. Authors provide authoritative analysis - including research findings and new theoretical insights - to bring readers original ways of understanding the campaign. Contributions also bring a rich range of disciplinary influences, from political science to cultural studies, journalism studies to geography. We hope this makes for a vibrant, informative and engaging read.

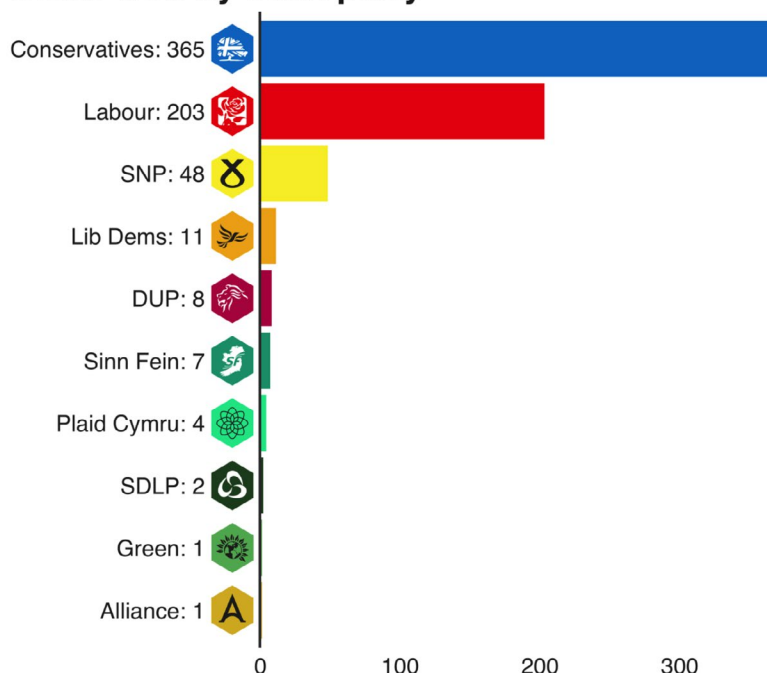
Winning party

Maps by Benjamin Hennig



Result maps courtesy of Ben Hennig, see his Chapter 18 for a discussion of different projections.

Seats won by each party

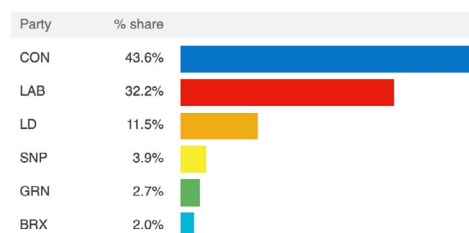


Note: Speaker included in Labour total

BBC

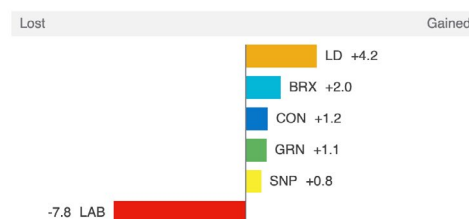
UK vote share

After 650 of 650 seats



UK vote share change since 2017

After 650 of 650 seats



Turnout

Registered voters: 47,587,254

% share: 67.3%

Change since 2017: -1.5



1

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Truth, lies and
civic culture

Delusions of democracy

General elections with multiple parties contesting seats are supposed to be a key indicator of democracy in action. But the simple existence of elections does not make a democracy. Elections must also be free and fair. In a democracy 'the people' are the overseers of government. Democracy requires that each individual be free to participate in the political community's self-government. Thus political freedom lies at the heart of the concept of democracy. As overseers of government, the people must have alternative, trustworthy sources of information in order to exercise their freedom to participate fairly. Not just during an election period but constantly, as knowledge is cumulative.

So let's put GE2019 to a simple test: was it free and fair?

Fair elections means elections that are fundamentally honest. But in an age of social media, honesty is far from straightforward. Tweets purporting to come from Corbyn were sent from fake accounts and First Draft found that 88% of Conservative Facebook campaigning ads were deemed by Full Fact, the UK's leading fact checking organisation, to be misleading. The BBC also stood accused of dishonesty through misleading editing (and later apologised – twice). Rather than honesty being the driver of content, this election, more than any other, felt like it was fuelled by a political economy of lies. Lies are simply more crowd pleasing, circulate rapidly, are based on intensely affective responses, are mood inducing and therefore are often more commercially attractive. But lying also erodes trust and so it is telling that the Ofcom news consumption survey for 2019 notes that in age of distrust 'word of mouth' is now considered a legitimate source of news.

Fair means everyone gets a vote yet we know that the electoral register is far from complete. In September 2019 research by the Electoral Commission noted that 17% of eligible voters in GB, as many as 9.4 million people, were either missing from the electoral register or not registered at their current address with stark differences between younger people, renters, low-income and BME people compared with older white people who own their own homes. On the 18 November the Electoral Commission warned that 25% of black voters in Great Britain were not registered to vote. There was a voter registration surge but even this only saw an additional 3.2 million applications to register. In addition, many migrants who live, work and pay taxes in the UK are not eligible to vote because they have not gone through the extensive and expensive process of gaining citizenship.

Fair also means everyone has equal opportunity to get their point across. This election has seen lack of clarity about who bankrolls the politicians. Billionaire donors have been shown to protect the position and interests of those with wealth

and power. Money in politics and campaigning has corrupted the electoral system turning the digital landscape into a playground for the elite. New techniques of digital manipulation give rise to sophisticated propaganda that is only just beginning to be understood.

Being *free* to participate fully requires being well informed – this relies upon the adequacy of processes, institutions and organisations of knowledge production. Yet this election saw unprecedented levels of misinformation, obfuscation and bias across most mainstream media that are well documented in this volume. The Conservatives changed their Twitter account to look like a fact checking service; Johnson refused to be interviewed by Andrew Neil on the BBC and clumsily hid a reporter's phone in his pocket, rather than respond to questions about the NHS. The study by [Loughborough University](#) showed that the press were overwhelmingly negative about the Labour Party.

Lack of freedom to participate is also connected to inequality. The poor have less influence over policies and politicians and vote less. Voter participation increases with income and age because the wealthier are more likely to be listened to. Inequality is not a condition conducive to a sustainable democratic politics. In the UK, from 1980 to 2016, the share of total income going to the top 1% has more than doubled. After allowing for inflation, the earnings of the bottom 90% in the UK have barely risen at all over the past 25 years.

Fairness and freedom are about the ability to hold power (including media power) to account. Yet both have been in short supply during this election. The Conservatives have been elected on a mandate to drop the second stage of the Leveson inquiry and repeal Section 40 of the Crime and Courts act (the final and integral part of the Royal Charter Framework of Press Regulation). There is no sign that they intend to regulate the tech giants to make elections and electioneering any fairer or freer. Quite the opposite. Democratic delusions abound.



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What's the election communication system like now?



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Faults are usually found in election campaigns afterwards. This time criticism morphed into widespread condemnation. Why? I answer by considering how election communication had evolved in four systemically important areas.

Parties' campaign strategies: Building on their 2017 campaign, the Conservatives comprehensively applied a consultancy-led model (based predominantly on simple slogans, etc.). Ethically relatively unconstrained, the objective was to win – full stop! Labour followed a movement-led model, much more policy-heavy. The purpose was to educate people of the need for radical anti-austerity, anti-inequality change. In 2017, I declared the consultancy model 'wounded', in 2019 it seemed to be alive and kicking (literally!). Equally I surmised in 2017 that exposure to Jeremy Corbyn's ideas and personality in BBC news and current affairs had 'probably' explained much of Labour's campaign-period surge, in 2019 no similar boost occurred.

How come? Labour's ambitious proposals opened a 'credibility gap' over their funding and practicality, which opponents frequently attacked and journalists incessantly probed. Its more nebulous position on Brexit continually deflected attention away from its core domestic policy themes. And on charges of anti-Semitism, Labour was continually given a 'when did you stop beating your wife' treatment! Labour, seemed to have failed to fully anticipate the onslaught – unlike pre-1997 when, according to Philip Gould, Labour had 'set up rebuttal and attack teams, backed up by computerised research systems reporting to a unified command'.

Journalists' strategies: Elections are increasingly characterised by what academics term 'journalistic interventionism' (alternatively 'interpretive journalism') - in 2019 to a greater extent than 2017.

Tabloids' attacks on Jeremy Corbyn were more virulent. Even the BBC Director of News and Current Affairs Fran Unsworth endorsed this approach, maintaining that, 'due impartiality means understanding that not all issues are "on the one hand, on the other hand". We don't support "false equivalence"'. Apparently BBC policy encouraged journalists to vigorously challenge politicians' claims. And those challenges often seemed particularly aggressive (e.g. accusing politicians of denying and misrepresenting the facts and misleading voters) and threatening the parties trustworthiness. Andrew Neil's relentlessly fierce gutting of Nicola Sturgeon's and Jeremy Corbyn's credentials were examples of which the Corporation was evidently immensely proud. Whatever the revelatory merits of this approach, its potential downsides should not be ignored: keeping party spokespeople on the back foot; over-confidence in journalists' news-value determined articulations; indiscriminateness in

lines of attack, some forensically effective but others trivial; and reinforcement of ordinary voters' disenchantment with politics, fostering what academics term an all-round 'media malaise'.

The BBC's Role: The BBC has come under unprecedented attack. During the 2019 campaign the integrity of its commitment to public service fairness was severely challenged. In its defence, the Corporation may point to its extensive campaign coverage throughout its numerous news programmes, much of it substantive. BBC 2's lunch-time Politics Live programme, with panels of fresh faces encouraged to engage in civil and respectful discussion, was a welcome innovation. That acknowledged, independent commentators accused the BBC of 'behaving in a way that favours the Tories', 'letting the people down who believe in it'. Examples: editing out Question Time audience members' laughter at Boris Johnson; replacing his clumsy laying of a wreath for the unknown soldier in 2019 with his more assured 2016 performance; Laura Kuenssberg's over-reliance on Dominic Cummings' briefings; a tendency to treat Johnson and Corbyn as equally untrustworthy; and its U-turn over the terms of Johnson's interviews. As a critic concluded: 'It is time for the BBC to regain its confidence as a fair-minded news organisation admired throughout the world.'

The Fragmentation of Almost Everything:

The most fundamentally transformative of all, manifest in the following:

- the communication system's ever greater abundance, with more – and more diverse – media outlets, channels, news providers, reception devices, augmented latterly by popular streaming services;
- people's different repertoires for navigating this fragmented information environment
- the onset of identity politics;
- the fracturing of intra-party ideologies and support;
- a public sphere, with entries to it of think tanks, official domestic and international bodies, charities and activist groups, all campaigning to attract media and public attention
- issues competing for public consideration – e.g. national security, climate change, housing and homelessness, child poverty, social care, Isis refugees, mental health, youth unemployment, the future of the Union, BBC finance, etc.

Future Questions: Will the government fall back on simplistic messages whenever challenges arise? Can Labour eventually produce a policy programme that combines radicalism with feasibility? Can the BBC reconsider its public service role, invigorating a more distinctive one? How will the new government be held to account? In 2017 I thought the 'crisis of public communication' had 'eased a bit'. But this time it had demonstrably intensified.

The rules of the campaign found wanting

The months preceding this election campaign saw publication of a slew of reports from respected organisations – including the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and the Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs committees – calling for urgent reform of our electoral rules.

Many of the key demands related to campaign regulation. The current rules were enacted in 2000, before online campaigning had gained any significance. There is general agreement on the urgent need to update them. At the very least, as the Electoral Commission has argued since 2003, digital advertising should be required, like print advertising to include an ‘imprint’, showing who has produced and paid for it. Online advertising should also be visible to all, so that misleading, contradictory, or pernicious messages cannot be targeted at particular groups without any opportunity for others to know what is happening. Some have proposed more radical measures: for example, one international think tank called in November for a ban on all personalised political advertising online. Other proposals would improve the transparency of campaign finance, constrain interventions from overseas, and increase the sanctioning powers of the Electoral Commission.

No such reforms were introduced before the election. Theresa May’s government said it would publish proposals for digital imprints, and the first Johnson Queen’s Speech, in October, reaffirmed that commitment. But parliament was dissolved without receiving any such proposals.

How, then, did this creaking regulatory structure perform during the campaign? In one sense, the lack of action from government made little difference, for the large internet companies themselves stepped in. Facebook and Google, for example, required all political advertising to carry an imprint (or ‘disclaimer’) and provided searchable ad libraries. Twitter went further, banning paid political advertising worldwide. Independent fact-checkers and some journalists also contributed to transparency, drawing extensively on the ad libraries to inform voters on what was going on.

For three reasons, however, such interventions proved insufficient. First, it is in principle inappropriate for the rules of political campaigning to be decided by the bosses of multinational companies rather than through democratic processes. This point was acknowledged in October by Facebook’s Richard Allan (a Liberal Democrat peer), who wrote that ‘it’s simply not appropriate for a private company like Facebook to be setting the rules of the game or calling the shots’.

Second, the information provided by the tech giants in their ad libraries is limited. Most notably in the context of an election under First Past the Post, where the overall result is the aggregation

of 650 separate contests across the country, those libraries give no information on constituency targeting. The true nature of the campaign on the ground therefore remains opaque.

Third, even if the tech companies introduced exemplary rules, this election illustrated the fact that transparency regulations alone cannot deliver healthy democratic discourse. Misinformation was rampant throughout the campaign, from all sides. Boris Johnson’s core promise to ‘get Brexit done’ by 31 January 2020 was well known to be a gross simplification, while Conservative promises on new hospitals and extra nurses were found wanting by independent fact-checkers. So were Labour’s claims that 95% of people would pay no extra tax under its plans and that the average family would save over £6,000. The Liberal Democrats were criticised most for misleading bar charts and sometimes manifestly false claims about their own electoral prospects. Conservatives, indeed, went further at times than simple misinformation, apparently seeking to undermine sources of independent, impartial analysis: their press office masqueraded on Twitter as a fact-checking organisation during the first leaders’ debate; and they threatened both the BBC and Channel 4 with punitive measures.

While transparency remains important, this experience demonstrates the need for more. There are three other possible approaches, as set out in a report I wrote earlier this year with Michela Palese: first, to ban misinformation; second, to make high-quality information readily accessible; third, to shift our wider political culture.

The first of these in fact operated to some degree during the campaign: for the first time since current legislation was introduced in 1983, a court issued an injunction preventing a party (the SNP) from distributing campaign material that made false claims about another candidate (Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson). Yet the provision in question (section 106 of the Representation of the People Act) is very narrowly drawn. Furthermore, for the courts to police truthfulness in policy disputes would be intolerable for free speech.

Only the remaining approaches could possibly succeed. It was striking, therefore, that no party made any mention of them in their manifestos. Those working for richer democracy – including scholars, journalists, independent organisations, and campaigners – still have a major job to do in developing proposals and demonstrating their potential efficacy.



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Sorry, not sorry: hubris, hate and the politics of shame



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In the early days of the election, I was struck by the number of MPs who were standing down this time round and the different reasons that women and men gave: a number of men were standing down because of party differences around Brexit and the withdrawal of the whip (eg Ken Clarke, Oliver Letwin, Phillip Hammond) while women spoke of trolling, intolerance and abuse (eg Gloria de Piero, Caroline Spelman). Nicky Morgan cited the toll her life as an MP had taken on her family and “the other sacrifices involved in, and the abuse for, doing the job of a modern MP”. Similarly, in the letter of resignation she sent to her constituents, Heidi Allen said, “You are attacked on a daily basis, on email, on social media, people shout at you in the street”.

Although reasons for standing down could be about *agency* – men going because of the principled things they did, women resigning because of the unprincipled things done to them – there is a larger point to make about sex, abuse and politics. Some of the other retiring male MPs were standing down for altogether less honourable reasons including inappropriate conduct in both words and deeds. As I read through the reasons why so many men were no longer standing – either pushed or jumped – I realised that I was looking at a taxonomy of testosterone. Men who had been under investigation for sexual misdemeanours whilst insisting on their innocence were now standing down to spend more time with their families (Kelvin Hopkins) or retiring early (Keith Vaz).

Those resignation stories echoed many others, including those about a whole slew of Prospective Parliamentary Candidates, as one story after another piled up in my notes, stories of men whose past had finally caught up with them but who often claimed their words or actions were those of a younger, sillier, less self-aware self. Sometimes, rather extraordinarily, they were given grace to continue. Ian Byrne was allowed to remain as a Labour PPC after he apologised for making and sharing “unacceptable” social media posts describing women MPs as c**ts and b**ches, insisting that he was a “very different person now”. Well, that’s all right then.

Ian and some of his fellow hopefuls are men who wished that the ‘right to be forgotten’ really was a thing, a handy tool for erasing some inconvenient truths. Their post-hoc justifications echo the sorry excuses which tumbled out of the mouths of so many sympathisers during the Jimmy Saville enquiry, claiming that sexual mores were ‘different’ back then and shouldn’t be judged by today’s standards. In 2014, Nick Conrad said that if women didn’t want to get raped they should “keep their knickers on”. Admittedly, he was a BBC local radio jock at the time and he did apologise a few days later saying that his words were ill-judged and that he was sorry to anybody who was offended.

This was a prescient apology as it contrasted rather spectacularly with comments made by Boris Johnson during the BBC’s first *Question Time* election special of this election, on 22 November, when he said that (when writing as a journalist), he had the right to speak out even if his words *could* have been seen as offensive to some people: he resolutely did not say when asked, that he was sorry for causing offence. The column inches and screen space which were subsequently devoted to lambasting Johnson’s casual arrogance did finally push him to articulate contrition, albeit rather too late for many of us to believe he really meant it.

On the other hand, despite his apology five years earlier, Nick Conrad decided to stand down, as did two other men whose past deeds rather than words resurfaced around election time, both sitting Conservative MPs, one accused of sexual harassment (Andrew Griffiths) and the other of sexual assault (Charlie Elphicke). In one of those odd little election quirks, their wives, Kate and Nathalie respectively, were subsequently selected to replace them on the stump, both going on to win their (relatively safe) Tory seats.

We should not expect our politicians, the women or the men, to be more moral or up-standing than the rest of us and we shouldn’t be surprised when our unrealistic expectations are then unmet and we find that this or that politician has feet of clay: women were de-selected over accusations of anti-Semitism, men resigned because of racist tweets. But we surely can expect them not to be stupid or think that we are. We are mired in a post-truth political landscape where we can find out almost anything online, including evidence of past indiscretions and accusations. Despite efforts to expunge them, they leave sufficient trace to tantalise the newshound and netizen alike, both seeking stories which are absolutely not about Brexit.

The “coarsening” of campaigns

The number of MPs who stood down prior to the GE2019 campaign may not have been above average, but the reasons given by MPs were noteworthy. According to one report by [Euronews/Institute for Government](#), 14 of the 74 who announced they were not standing in the election cited abuse as the cause of resignation or abuse was referenced in resignation statements. In a 29 October 2019 letter to her constituents, MP Heidi Allen cited “threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media” as the reason for her departure. Longer serving MPs, such as Alan Duncan, claimed the job of an MP was “coarser and ruder” than when he had entered politics in 1992. According to the Euronews story, abuse was more commonly cited by women than men as a reason for standing down: 25% of female MPs standing down, compared to 17% of their male counterparts, referred to the hostile environment. Men made reference to today’s politics being a “coarser” (Nicholas Soames and Alan Duncan) or a “disturbing” place (Norman Lamb) with women MPs, having entered Parliament more recently, more likely to directly reference threatening behavior (both online and offline).

These stories of abuse-related resignations were preceded by a 2017 report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life detailing issues relating to abuse and harassment in campaigns. The work on this report was spurred by the murder of MP Jo Cox, who served as a Labour Party MP from May 2015 until her death in June 2016. The written submission to the committee provided by the team who conducted the Representative Audit of Britain suggested that one third of candidates surveyed had experienced inappropriate behavior during the 2017 campaign.

Between the release of the report on “Intimidation in Public Life” and the 2019 election, there were a number of public reports on the hostile environment in the House of Commons. A House of Commons report released in July of 2019, led by senior lawyer Gemma White, spoke of bullying and harassment of MPs’ staff. Coming at the same time was a report based on an inquiry conducted by Naomi Ellenbogen QC, that staff in the House of Lords were also bullied and harassed. Both of these followed a 2018 independent report by Dame Laura Cox which claimed that abuse was tolerated and the system for dealing with abuse complaints was insufficient.

The evidence of an environment of harassment and bullying would lead one to conclude that politics has become toxic. Expressions of concern about incivility in politics are one dimension of a popular recognition that democracies across the globe are “going through difficult times”. On the one hand, politicians suffer abuse from constituents and the public; on the other

hand, politicians also use fearmongering, often times inciting incivility among political elites. These transformations in the landscape have lead scholars to claim that politics has become “coarsened”, polarized, detached from the truth and, above all, “uncivil”. By these measures of incivility, the relationship between and among elites and the public has been compromised.

There are at least two questions we can address about incivility in political life that are relevant when analysing GE2019. First, to what extent has the digital transformation in campaign communication impacted on the tone of political debate? Second, what are the implications of the coarsened debate on citizen engagement?

As noted, in the 2017 Public Life report, social media has changed the conduct of elections and how the public engages with candidates. Candidates must be on social media to win votes - social media campaigning can influence candidates’ and parties’ electoral fortunes. Yet, according to Delmar and Hudson, attacks on social media were the most common form of harassment reported by candidates. A report on Twitter abuse in the 2019 campaign by PoliMonitor, suggests an increase in problematic tweets, with women candidates receiving only slightly more abusive tweets than male candidates.

In addition to concerns about the safety of political candidates, online attacks can also have corrosive effects on citizen engagement. We asked 1,277 respondents who participated in a voting advice application whether they agree that “Seeing politicians get attacked on social media makes me less likely to participate in politics”. Overall, approximately 28% agreed with the statement with women more likely than men (33% to 28%) and Remainders more likely than Leavers (36% to 18%) to agree. This implies the coarsening of politics is limiting political engagement for a substantial portion of the public, potentially skewing participation in political campaigns, and even voting, to those who enjoy or are mobilized by this style of politics. Given that much of this appears to be driven by social media, getting Brexit done appears unlikely to improve the situation.



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Online hate and the “nasty” election



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The 2019 election may be remembered as much for the historic Conservative victory and the collapse of the Labour party as for being the “nasty election”. Here we offer an assessment of that epithet, including a rapid analysis of how candidates were targeted by toxic content on Twitter in the final week of the campaign.

Rising levels of hate and aggression have been observed in politics for several years, particularly since the 2016 referendum. They risk creating a toxic atmosphere, silencing dissenting voices and marginalising whole communities. Women MPs in particular have cited astonishing levels of misogynistic hate and rape or death threats.

These issues bedevilled both main parties from the start of the campaign, when Heidi Allen stood down citing “*nastiness and intimidation*”. Accusations of prejudice and harassment were levelled at the parties and candidates themselves. The UK’s Chief Rabbi denounced Labour over anti-Semitism and one Labour MP claimed that Corbyn’s “inaction on anti-Semitism had turned it into the ‘nasty party’”. The Conservatives received accusations of Islamophobia from their own politicians, such as Baroness Warsi, and made constant references to Boris Johnson’s racist and Islamophobic use of language. Conservative, Scottish Labour and Lib Dem candidates were investigated or expelled for anti-semitism, while the Brexit party expelled activists for “hideous” racist abuse. As anti-racist organization Hope Not Hate claimed in the aftermath, “Among marginalized communities, there is a real angst and fear....It was a really ugly campaign.”

Here we investigate the last week of the campaign, a period often associated with greater vitriol as parties make their final pitch, by examining tweets sent to candidates. Our dataset comprises 5.1 million tweets, analysed using Perspective, a tool to identify ‘toxic’ comments developed by Google Jigsaw. 103,837 (2%) tweets were identified as toxic, which were sent to 939 of the 2,620 candidates. The remaining 1,681 did not receive any toxic tweets.

We see a high variation in the levels of toxicity received by candidates, even amongst the top ten most targeted (Table 1). Conservatives and Labour party leaders received the greatest number of toxic tweets, Johnson received most, 36,967, one-third of the total. Nearly 4% of his tweets were toxic, compared with 1.6% of Corbyn’s. The distribution of the percentage of toxic tweets across all candidates exhibits even larger variations. Figure 1(a) shows a fat-tailed distribution (typical of internet-based phenomena) with a small number of candidates receiving high proportions, for the majority less than 2% of tweets were toxic.

Party affiliation captures some key differences in the level of toxicity, as shown in Figure 1(b). Conservative candidates received a larger

proportion of toxic tweets (3.5%), compared with 1.5% for Labour. This finding is robust whether party leaders are included or not. There is a strong positive relationship between the total number of tweets that candidates received and the number of toxic tweets, holding across all parties. However, this relationship is sublinear: the more tweets that candidates received, the smaller the proportion that were toxic, with notable exceptions (e.g. Boris Johnson and Johnny Mercer), the result of which makes it difficult to generalize about candidates’ experiences.

Finally, the volume and proportion of toxic tweets which were sent varied hugely over time across the last week. For volume, there were three clear spikes related to key campaign events: the Johnson-Corbyn BBC debate (6th Dec), Question Time (9th) and election day (12th). However, accounting for the total number of tweets sent to candidates each hour, only the day of the election is still a large spike (Figure 2), when toxicity levels were highest. For some candidates the overwhelming majority of abuse they received was on election day; Diane Abbott, for example, attracted media attention for wearing two left shoes when going to vote, accounting for 63% of the toxic tweets she received.

In a time when so much of politics is organised, mobilized and discussed online, hate speech and interpersonal aggression on social media pose huge problems which need to be effectively countered. If not, we risk discouraging whole generations of young women, or people from religious or racial minorities, from political participation. As our recent Turing policy briefing shows, collating the necessary evidence to assess the prevalence and impact of online abuse is difficult, but essential. Here we have provided initial insight into how candidates received online abuse in the last throes of the election campaign. This will be explored in future work as part of our ongoing efforts to better detect, understand and counter online hate. To this end, we are creating a real-time ‘Online Hate Monitor’ for online abuse, including hate directed against elected politicians, which will be publicly available for all to use.

Candidate	Party	Number of toxic tweets received	Percentage of tweets which are toxic (%)	Total number of tweets received
Boris Johnson	Conservatives	36,967	3.7	1,008,558
Jeremy Corbyn	Labour	29,322	1.6	1,815,937
Matt Hancock	Conservatives	8,052	5.0	159,685
Jo Swinson	Liberal Democrats	2,946	2.7	107,599
David Lammy	Labour	2,329	2.1	113,114
Diane Abbot	Labour	2,136	3.0	71,834
James Cleverly	Conservatives	1,860	4.2	44,182
Johnny Mercer	Conservatives	1,512	10.2	14,772
Sajid Javid	Conservatives	1,277	2.5	52,007
Angela Rayner	Labour	1,204	1.1	108,233

Table 1: Ten candidates targeted by the largest number of toxic tweets.

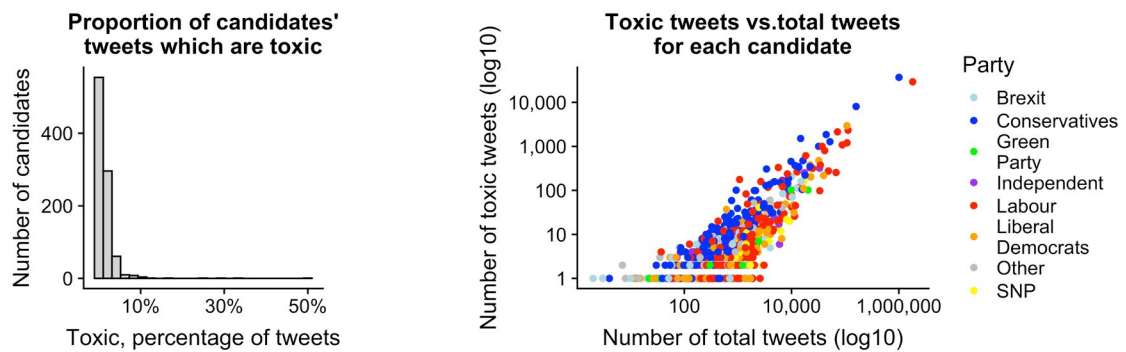


Figure 1: (a) Distribution of the percentage of candidates' tweets which are toxic, (b) The number of toxic tweets versus the total number of tweets for each candidate.

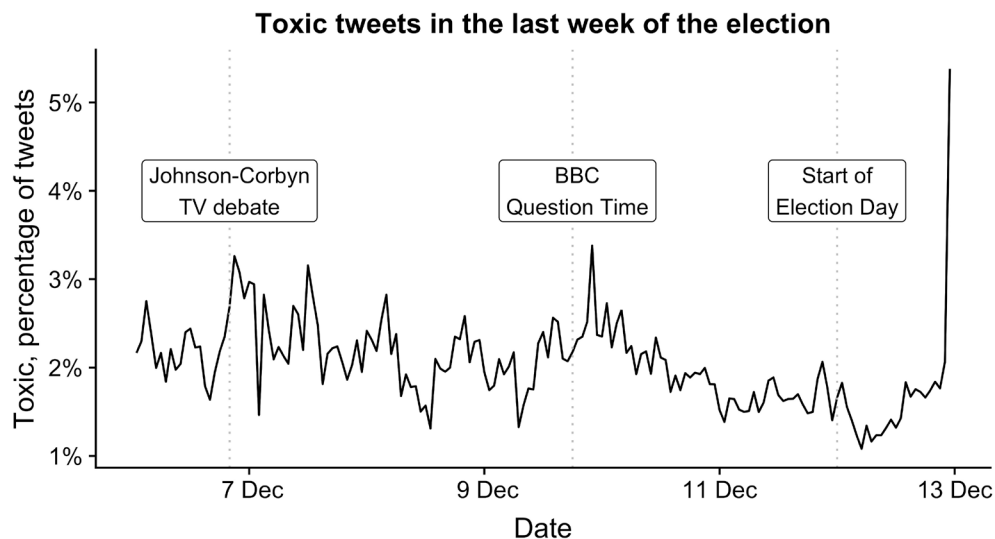


Figure 2: Percentage of all tweets received by candidates which are toxic each hour

GE2019 was not a Brexit election: trust and credibility, anti-politics and populism



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One of the most influential pieces of scholarship I have ever read was written by the Nobel Prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom and warned against ‘the danger of self-evident truths’. In this short and accessible article she made the simple argument that ‘the fact that something is widely believed does not make it correct’ and combined this with a plea to scholars to constantly challenge and disrupt dominant assumptions and beliefs.

The belief that GE2019 was ‘a Brexit election’ has arguably emerged in the post-election analyses and commentary as ‘a self-evident truth’ and there is little doubt that the mantra of ‘get Brexit done’ was highly influential. However, the danger of *this* ‘self-evident truth’ is that it risks veiling the existence of a more troubling series of underlying issues that all revolve around the existence of a growing gap between the governors and the governed.

GE2019 was not *a Brexit election* but *a disaffection election*.

As the Hansard Society’s 2019 Audit of Political Engagement revealed, the public’s attitude to politicians, political institutions and political processes was far from positive before the election was even called. Three-quarters of those surveyed believed that the main political parties were too divided to serve the best interests of the country, and the same proportion lacked confidence in the confidence of MPs to cope with Brexit. The 2019 Future of England survey made for uncomfortable reading as it suggested that a majority of people on either side of the Brexit debate said that the break-up of the union, undermining faith in democracy, protests in which members of the public get badly injured and violence directed towards MPs were ‘worth it’ to achieve their desired Brexit.

This may explain why ‘get Brexit done’ proved such a seductive commitment, but it might also explain why GE2019 was mired in concerns regarding aggression, abuse and victimization. As the Joint Committee on Human Rights reported in October 2019, ‘The level of abuse faced by elected representatives and others in public life is now so great it is undermining their engagement with constituents, how they express themselves on social media, and carry out their democratic duties.’ Post-election concerns about the need to ‘dial down the heat’ in political debates is a reflection of the concern that matters nearly boiled over in GE2019.

But, at base, this was an election born through political frustration, that fuelled anti-political sentiment and was almost defined through a constant focus on two key themes: trust and credibility. As the various leadership debates underlined, the public did not trust Boris Johnson, and they were equally dubious as to the credibility of Jeremy Corbyn’s plans for public spending. In

this context what GE2019 evolved towards was a form of ‘pitchfork politics’ fueled by an acceptance of anti-political context and therefore a shift towards increasingly populist positions. Populism, however, of very different kinds. For Boris it was a strong form of political populism defined through the lens of ‘the people’ versus ‘politicians’, ‘parliament’, ‘judges’ and just about anyone that challenged the ‘self-evident truth’ that he knew what was best for the country. Corbyn, on the other hand, adopted a form of economic populism in which the age of austerity was replaced with a new age of financial exuberance. Jeremy Corbyn may have offered a very distinctive style of populism-in-a-cardigan but he, like Boris, knew exactly who he was against,

“So we’re going after the tax dodgers. We’re going after the dodgy landlords. We’re going after the bad bosses. We’re going after the big polluters. Because we know whose side we’re on ... You know what really scares the elite? What they’re actually afraid of is paying their taxes. So in this election they’ll fight harder and dirtier than ever before. They’ll throw everything at us because they know we’re not afraid to take them on.”

So in some ways GE2019 was defined by Brexit but it’s also possible to suggest that it reflected the latest stage in a far-longer and highly-worrying decline in public confidence in politics that has been building-up, like pressure in a volcano, long before the UK suffered its Brexit-tential crisis. Brexit provided the lightning-rod, it’s vented frustrations but many of them have little to do with the UK’s membership of the European Union and more to do with deeper and more profound frustrations concerning the evolution and future of democracy. To define GE2019 simply as ‘a Brexit election’ may well provide a short-term and relatively obvious interpretation of recent events but it might also distract attention from the deeper challenges regarding the health of British democracy that must at some point be addressed.

The online public shaming of political candidates in the 2019 General Election

Throughout the 2019 General Election the online public shaming of candidates became a regular event. There were common stories of aspiring politicians who had unwisely taken to Twitter or other social media feeds becoming unstuck as their misjudged comments from the digital past came back to haunt them. Candidates' online contributions ranged from sex texting to inflammatory statements about minorities in terms of their gender, race and religious creed. Most specifically, Conservatives were accused of being spitefully anti-Islamic, while Labour rivals were besmirched as being virulently anti-semitic.

The online shaming of public and private individuals appears to be one of the unforeseen consequences of the increased centrality of the social media in our everyday lives. In 2015, the journalist Jon Ronson wrote *So You Have Been Publicly Shamed* which identified the escalation of shaming both in terms of its instigators and its victims. As he noted, unfortunate statements have become blurred with more provocative and outright vicious commentary within the digital commons. This suggests that what was once perceived as an electronic agora has demonstrated an innate duality wherein:

"(On the one hand it is) powerful and important (in establishing) a new civil rights battlefield. (On the other hand it has created) ... a nasty imitation. ... The great thing about social media was how it gave a voice to voiceless people. We are now turning it into a surveillance society where the smartest way to survive is to go back to being voiceless".

Therefore, as social media has moved from the periphery to the centre of political campaigning, it is hardly surprising that the processes of online shaming have been replicated in the realm of modern day politics. Along with the weaponisation of information on Twitter and Facebook, the bully pulpit of the information superhighway has become the new campaign battlefield. Thus, practitioners of the 'dark arts' such as Boris Johnson's Chief Advisor Dominic Cummings can engage in an online version what was described by the disgraced President Richard M. Nixon's operatives as 'rat fucking'.

In the case of all of the political parties, a series of online rebukes were issued to catch out candidates for their previous indiscretions. Invariably, their social media pasts were subjected to 'Tweet dredging' – wherein teams of party workers go through their opponents social media history looking for incriminating posts. Therefore, respective Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Brexit Party members were unceremoniously withdrawn even before their campaigns had begun. While some indicated their stupidity in a throwaway remark or tweet, there were examples of the genuinely untoward and outright nasty

forms of political intolerance.

However, it is interesting to note that as Johnson engaged in a campaign rampant with partial truths, misinformation and outright falsehoods, how little he was subjected to forms of online or conventional media shaming. Moreover, despite his avowed claims of a zero-tolerance of Islamophobia, The Guardian showed that he and several leading Conservatives actively backed anti-Islamic candidates who had posted racist comments on a variety of Twitter accounts. Here, "Incidents include one candidate who argued that Muslims have divided loyalties, as well as blaming immigrants for bringing HIV to Britain, and another who retweeted posts from former English Defence League leader Tommy Robinson."

Conversely, the media happily engaged in the online hybridisation of untruthful memes which circulated in cyber-space about Jeremy Corbyn. This was of little surprise to those who have studied the extensive bias of the UK press and broadcasting which has existed in light of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

Consequently, Johnson was allowed to engage in the casual proliferation of offensive racial epithets and populist policy contradictions. He was indulged in spite of being caught out on camera by a journalist showing him a picture on his mobile phone of a sick child lying on the floor of Leeds Infirmary. Moreover, he received little criticism for his exploitation of the deaths of the victims of the London Bridge terrorist tragedy or hiding from a GMTV journalist in an industrial fridge. As Peter Osborne commented, the BBC was at fault in its uncritical dissemination of his many lies. Yet, this eventuality may be seen to be less surprising when the oldest propagandist adage of them all – "the bigger the lie; the more people believe it" – is applied to the realm of the digital public sphere.



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Strategic lying: the new game in town



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Accusations of lying against politicians, particularly those involved in an election campaign, are far from new. Back in 1974 Hannah Arendt reminded us that “.....the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history”. But in covering and researching more election campaigns than I care to remember, this is the first one that the notion of liars and lying has been so prominent. Nor can it simply be attributed to the particular character of Boris Johnson, whose relationship to the truth has been, to say the very least, casual. The lying in the 2019 election has been more systematic than in past campaigns where the problem was more one of voters trying to navigate a stream of spin rather than trying to swim through a torrent of lies.

In fact the lies of 2019, particularly from the Conservative side had a particular character which I am describing as ‘strategic lying’ can be traced back to a the evolution of an environment in which politicians, who in the past if caught lying were obliged to resign, now appear to have gained a ‘permission to lie’.

Strategic lying involves, first, the telling a blatant untruth in the full knowledge that within minutes of its dissemination it will be called out as a lie, but for a number of reasons this doesn’t appear to matter.

First, because the main function of the lie is not to communicate a message per se but to have impact. Writing after the EU referendum Tory strategist Dominic Cummings said about that slogan - “We send £350 million to the EU. Let’s spend it on the NHS instead” - it was intended to make an impact, not to inform the electorate. And because of its impact the strategic lie gets shared, tweeted and re-posted hundreds of thousands of times on publication and then again as it is rebutted. When ITV News covered the launch of the ‘Boris Bus’ during the Brexit campaign they devoted seven minutes to Mr Johnson refusing to accept the interviewer’s assertions that the figure was misleading. It didn’t matter if the audience doubted Johnson’s words – the subject of ‘our money’ going to Brussels when it could be better spent on the NHS, dominated the airwaves and remained in public consciousness.

But there is more to it than merely getting a message across. The strategic lie’s second function is to ensure that the subject matter of the lie stays at the top of the news agenda. And its third function is more generalised, it’s to sew confusion making audiences immune to messages from opponents that might cut through the misleading narrative – the post-truth environment incarnate.

The strategic lie first manifest itself in the 2019 campaign with the release of the video doctored by the Conservative Press Office falsely showing Labour’s Brexit spokesperson, Keir Starmer,

apparently unable to answer a question about his Party’s stance on Brexit. The clip went viral on social media and then viral again when it was replayed for the purposes of rebuttal. The ruse had achieved its purpose. It was widely disseminated and, in the process, reinforced the narrative that Labour’s Brexit policy was so confused that even their own Brexit lead appeared to not know what it was.

There were numerous other examples of this strategy in action – Mr. Johnson denying there would be any border checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, despite the Treasury and his own Brexit Secretary saying there would be. The Chancellor of the Exchequer Sajid Javid claiming that Labour’s spending commitments amounted to an astronomical £1.3 trillion - a gross exaggeration, made to sound seemingly credible by the figure £1.3 trillion rather than a more general £1 trillion. The figure was demonstrably bogus but as the Chancellor toured the TV studios rebutting the rebuttals Labour’s claimed, over-spending stayed in the headlines.

The media research literature demonstrates why strategic lying is such an effective tactic.

First, because correcting inaccurate statements, by either journalists or fact checkers, might persuade the uncommitted, but those sympathetic to the original message will reject the correction. Indeed it can actually increase the intensity of their belief in the original lie as a means of avoiding cognitive dissonance.

Second, for those sympathetic to, or neutral about, the original message, the memory of the correction fades rapidly but the memory of the original lie remains.

Third, because of the tried and tested power of repetition, if a lie is repeated often enough its content becomes easier to process and subsequently regarded as more truthful than any new statements rebutting it.

So, in an age of ‘permission to lie’, it appears that the benefits of strategic lying far outweigh any costs which could well mean that soon enough all politicians will be doing it and the quality of our democracy will further decline.

Fact-checkers' attempts to check rhetorical slogans and misinformation

The Conservative Party's decisive win has been widely attributed to simple, forceful rhetoric, online misinformation and dirty tricks that 'wrong-footed' the mainstream media, although they were not the only party implicated. It was also an election where fact-checking was more prominently featured than in the past, albeit partly because its profile was raised by one of the dirty tricks. Fact-checking journalism originated in a desire to go beyond reporting claim and counter-claim and examine how well-grounded politicians' rhetoric was in evidence. However, both rhetoric and online misinformation present challenges to how fact-checkers have operated in the last 10-15 years they have been with us.

Firstly, the practice has traditionally been focused on claims about policy pledges and the incumbent party's record in government – and the three main fact-checkers have run over 50 checks between them on Conservative policy claims alone – but it can be difficult or contentious to identify the unstated factual claims behind a rhetorical slogan. In 2017, 'Strong and Stable' was largely (and fatefully) taken to be a personal credibility claim for Theresa May in contrast to Jeremy Corbyn, and therefore based primarily in subjective judgements. Having said that, connected claims about May's record of successful negotiation were *not* checked, whilst claims about Corbyn's popularity within his party, past voting record and personal associations *were*. The slogan that connects 'Strong and Stable' with 'get Brexit done,' however, is the contrast offered for both – a 'coalition of chaos,' which perhaps resonated more after 30 months of a minority (and divided) Conservative government.

Reality Check gamely had a go at fact-checking 'get Brexit done,' pointing out that Brexit wouldn't be done and dusted on the day the UK exits the European Union, and that there will be years of negotiation and debate still to come. Although the article repeatedly says that Brexit *won't* be done when the UK leaves, it takes the form of an explainer, with no 'verdict' section. However, it does indirectly address the implicit claim of the rhetorical slogan, which is the dubious assertion that the only thing making Brexit difficult and intractable is parliamentary deadlock.

Although a distraction from policy substance, then, process – the horse-race, relative popularity, questions of who *could* win, and not only win but form an effective government – was a key part of the persuasive discourse, but the most contentious claims appeared not in the mainstream media but in targeted leaflets and Facebook adverts.

The second challenge for fact-checkers is that they tend to focus on claims that politicians make in mainstream media appearances. Therefore fact-checkers do echo the news issue agenda, but they don't follow it slavishly. As in 2017, attention to process claims in fact-checking was a fraction

of that in the news media (about 8% compared to around a third) but there was a clear shift in focus from the accuracy of opinion polls to focus instead on parties' dubious claims about tactical voting in campaign literature.

In this though, the Conservatives were only picked up for a very minor miscalculation of required swing and for oversimplifying the effect of a vote switch, and it was the Liberal Democrats who were accused of the most egregious misuse of voter intention polls (by both Reality Check and Full Fact). However, it is not straightforward for fact-checkers to get access to these targeted and local materials, and they have to depend in part on the audience sending examples in or posting them to third party repositories.

Fact-checkers also tried to address purposeful disinformation and more well-intentioned misinformation online, but they rarely detected the problematic material themselves. Full Fact was the only fact-checker to address material from social media in 2017, positively assessing a viral video. This time they were expecting to find deepfakes, but only found an obviously digitally manipulated video of Dianne Abbott superimposed with clown make-up, with sound removed and subtitles added to attribute different words (shared by a Facebook page dedicated to attacking 'antifa'), but with obvious 'satirical' (or perhaps 'shitposting') intent rather than to deceive.

It wasn't just rogue partisans found circulating dubious material, of course – a misleadingly edited video of Jess Phillips that was circulated by the Conservative press office (@CCHQ) and main Twitter accounts "made it appear as if she said Labour couldn't deliver the promises in its 2019 manifesto." Full Fact clarified that it was an old clip of her talking about manifestos in general. In this instance the fact-check forced a correction. However, corrections can be meaningless when the original posts have already been widely shared, and an unrepentant attitude can be detected in @CCHQ defiantly changing its Twitter name back to FactcheckUK to announce the Conservatives as the winner of the election, suggesting that negative verdicts and corrections are no longer feared or avoided.



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The election where British fourth estate journalism moved closer to extinction



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Remarkably, many still labour under the impression that we have an independent, autonomous news media in Britain. Yet, following the 2019 election, I think that assumption has no more validity here than it would in say Italy, Hungary or Poland. The Conservative-leaning press have always questioned Labour and favoured the Tory Party. Yet, as successive Loughborough election studies have shown, those differences have become ever more extreme since 2010.

Even so, 2019 reached levels I haven't witnessed in some three decades of voting. Four previous years of culture wars aside, in this electoral period, the large majority of press outlets were relentless in their attacks on the Labour Party while minimising criticism of the Conservatives. This time round though, there were also serious failings in broadcasting, most concerning in the BBC. Many were shocked at the multiple 'mistakes', dominant agendas and framing of the issues, leaders and parties by the Corporation's leading reporters and editors. Others have already been documenting these failings in some detail. I agree with many of their analyses. The only question for me is how we best explain what happened.

On the one hand, the classic political economy critique of British news media seems more in evidence than ever. A few billionaire media owners, with close Tory Party connections, saw their mutual interests threatened and joined forces as never before. The BBC, after years of intimidation, felt threatened by a ruthless, hard-line administration, and fell into line all too easily. Much of this makes sense yet we also need to look at other causal media factors.

The one I want to focus on here is the long-term erosion of the dividing line between politics and journalism. Fundamental to our notions of ideal journalism in the UK and other 'Liberal' media models of democracy is that there is such a line. It is a picture fleshed out in detail in Herbert Gans' classic 1979 account of how reporters and their sources engage in a professional 'tug of war'. Both sides have to work with each other to achieve different goals and thus cooperate through gritted teeth. It is a perspective that has been applied to British journalism in multiple studies and professional biographies.

However, what was always downplayed in many of these accounts was the degree to which individual reporters and politicians were apt to work together; or the ways and means news media and political parties would converge around a mutually-beneficial set of agendas or objectives. Some of what happened in this election can also be seen as an extension of such trends, as highlighted in earlier media sociology studies.

For one, the revolving door between politics and journalism has spun ever faster with implications for both professions. The communications

departments of political parties have become stuffed full of former print and broadcast journalists. So too, an increasing number of front-line politicians have had at least some prior professional experience in journalism or public relations. This time round, Boris Johnson and his key ally-frenemy Michael Gove, were first and foremost professional journalists who have become hybrid journalist-politician operators. Those cross-profession networks and know-hows have proved very useful to a Conservative Party weak on policy but strong on media management.

Second, studies of news sources have found two consistent things: journalists tend to gravitate towards powerful elite sources, usually favouring government politicians over their oppositions; and the more under-resourced a news organisation is, the more reliant reporters become on 'information subsidies' supplied by their regular sources. In recent years, the collapse of the business model of journalism has left correspondents far too dependent on political source (mis) information. The Conservative Party/Government has been able to take full advantage of an under-resourced UK media in their tactics, using their established lines to successfully influence media agendas and story frames on multiple occasions.

Third, in the UK as elsewhere, both news reporting and politics have now converged around populist, personal and extreme content. In highly competitive times, both sides push for consumer-voter eyes whatever the reputational costs. For struggling newsmakers, competing with click-bait sites and distracted citizens, reproducing the extreme claims and lies of favoured politicians has thus become a win-win situation. For media-savvy political strategists, lies and fabrications, whether revealed or not, generate extensive online and off-line coverage. The Conservatives proved far more adept than Labour at exploiting these tendencies, both across legacy and social media.

Ultimately, in these and other ways, the current interests of a predominantly right-leaning UK media and a right-wing political class have converged too much. The dividing line between sources and journalists, or parties and news organisations, has virtually disappeared. The 2019 election starkly revealed what all of this implies for the future of British fourth estate journalism (spoiler alert, it's terminal).

Rethinking impartiality in an age of political disinformation

Since 2010 political parties have stopped holding daily press conferences during election campaigns. Ahead of the last four elections, they have concentrated their efforts on carefully controlled events and rallies, along with more sophisticated online and social media campaigning.

This trend continued into the 2019 election campaign, but a more cynical approach to electioneering was evident, with parties pumping out disinformation to enhance their electoral prospects.

There were, of course, old-age disinformation techniques from all political parties, such as Liberal Democrat leaflets featuring highly misleading opinion polls or exaggerated claims by the Labour party about the future costs of the NHS in a Tory post-Brexit US trade deal.

But, above all, the Conservative party led the way in ruthlessly spreading disinformation, from repeatedly making dubious claims to avoiding scrutiny from particular news organisations, programmes and journalists. For example, a [Full Fact](#) study concluded that 88% of its Facebook adverts between 1 and 4 December were misleading.

The Conservative party used the latest digital tools to mislead voters and undermine opponents. During the first televised leaders debate between Johnson and Corbyn, for example, the Conservatives turned its Twitter profile into a fact-checking service, which undermined the impartiality of independent fact-checking sites. The party also bought websites – such as [labourmanifesto.co.uk](#) – which contained false information about Labour's manifesto proposals. It forced Google to suspend eight websites set up by the Tories less than two weeks before election day.

While these new disinformation tactics have attracted some criticism, perhaps more significant was the party's relentless use of misleading claims about their policy plans. On Brexit, for example, the likelihood of getting it done quickly was highly misleading since negotiations with the EU are likely to continue for years. Similarly, they promised to build 40 new hospitals when, in fact, funding was only available for six costing 2.7bn with £100 million for seed funding to explore building 34 more hospitals in the future.

In the face of such brazen disinformation, how can broadcasters maintain their legal obligation to impartiality while also hold parties to account?

The BBC, in particular, has been under sustained attack about its inability to stand up to the agenda-setting power of the Conservative Party. It has sought to feature Reality Check – its fact-checking service – more prominently in routine coverage. As I argued in the [New Statesman](#) during the campaign, while fact-checking is welcomed journalistic initiative, broadcasters – not just the BBC – need to be bolder and more strategically aware of how to effectively counter disinformation.

Many journalists have attempted to challenge dubious claims, but found it difficult to do so in a sustained way. And yet, the democratic implications of not holding parties to account are profound. Focus group research during the campaign, for example, showed people were horrified when they learnt Brexit would not be achieved any time soon. Similarly, when voters heard Conservative candidates promising to build 40 new hospitals, how many of them knew it was just six if only some outlets fact-checked the claim?

This points to the limits of fact-checking news after it has been aired or published. When the BBC's Reality Check corrected a Question Time audience claim that the Labour Party will increase income tax for people earning under £80,000 per year the morning after the programme was broadcast – as it did during the campaign – the impact on the millions watching (and re-watching the clip later on social media) was almost impossible to counter.

So how can broadcasters effectively counter political disinformation?

In my view, they need to be bolder in how they interpret impartiality. So, for example, rather than allowing politicians to freely repeat the phrase 'get Brexit done', this could have been robustly countered on screen with a strap line. Rather than broadcast live interviews with leaders, they could have been pre-recorded and fact-checked during the programme. In live TV debates fact-checkers could have appeared in the programme in order to directly challenge claims.

There also needs to be greater sensitivity in fact-checking reporting because repeating claims may amplify disinformation. When the Conservatives' claimed the Labour manifesto cost £1.2 trillion, for instance, fact-checkers contesting this figure may well have undermined Corbyn's economic credibility by re-stating the eye-catching trillion pound figure. In other words, political parties could be making cynical assertions – alleging Labour spending will exceed a trillion pounds – knowing full well it will stick in voters' minds more than the correction of it.

No doubt broadcasters will face party political flak – notably the BBC – if they adopt a more adversarial fact-checking style in election reporting. But if they all signed up to it, this approach would soon become normalised in routine campaign coverage.

In my view, broadcasters need to be better prepared to combat party political disinformation if they want to more effectively serve their audiences. Over the next two years, Dr Maria Kyriakidou and I will be researching how political disinformation can be effectively countered as part of a new AHRC research grant.



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Fake news, emotions, and social media



Prof Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

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When the dust settles, the 2019 General Election will likely be remembered as the first UK ‘fake news’ campaign. With the Conservatives investing particularly heavily in their digital campaign, the party engaged in a range of misinformation tactics. These included the doctoring of a video of Keir Starmer, the Shadow Brexit Secretary, to make him look “lost for words”, and the rebranding of the Conservative press office twitter account as UK FactCheck. The Liberal Democrats were criticised for distributing campaign materials resembling local newspapers, a strategy also used by local Conservative and Labour candidates.

In the era of social media, the extent to which misinformation gains traction depends largely on the emotional resonance of the narrative underpinning it. As Alfred Hermida put it in his book, *Tell everyone*, “Emotions play a vital part in the social transmission of news and information. Interest, happiness, disgust, surprise, sadness, anger, fear and contempt affect how some stories catch on and travel far wider than others.” The fact that political behaviour is shaped by our emotional attachments is not a new phenomenon. What is new is our ability to widely share stories that *feel* true to us - what sociologist Arlie Hochschild has referred to as our “deep stories.” As numerous studies have found, the rise of social media has led to widespread sharing without verifying the accuracy of information.

In the UK general election, the interplay between emotions, fake news and the “deep stories” about politics was perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the story of four-year old Jack on the floor in Leeds General Infirmary. On December 8, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* published a report detailing how Jack, under observation for pneumonia, “was forced to sleep on a cold hospital floor for more than four hours because of a shortage of beds.” The story was accompanied by an image taken by his mother. It showed the four-year old, attached to a drip, lying on the floor on a red winter coat. The story gained quickly gained traction across social media platforms, as Labour supporters urged voters to back the party to address the crisis in the NHS.

Jack on the hospital floor swiftly became the Aylan Kurdi of the general election. By showing the plight of one individual, the image dramatised the larger “deep story” that resonated with so many voters: a story about how cuts to the NHS are endangering the lives of ordinary people. While the Labour Party fought to place the NHS centre stage of the election debate throughout the campaign, the image of Jack did far more than any planned interventions to call attention to the health crisis.

On December 9th, the story took another turn. In an interview with ITV’s Joe Pike, Boris Johnson repeatedly refused to look at the photo of Jack, ultimately pocketing the reporter’s phone.

Subsequently, the Prime Minister was widely berated for his lack of compassion. Jeremy Corbyn suggested that the Prime Minister “just doesn’t care,” while Liberal Democrat Tim Farron raised concern about a “shocking lack of empathy.” The story of Jack came to fit into a deep story about the Prime Minister’s human failings, encapsulated in his inadequate emotional response to the tragedy of the sick boy on the hospital floor.

Later that same day, however, posts on Twitter and Facebook appeared, suggesting that the image of Jack was staged. The original post stated: ““Very interesting. A good friend of mine is a senior nursing sister at Leeds Hospital - the boy shown on the floor by the media was in fact put there by his mother who then took photos on her mobile phone and uploaded it to media outlets before he climbed back onto his trolley.” Identical messages were swiftly posted by hundreds of users, suggesting an orchestrated misinformation campaign. However, the original source of the story came forward to say that her account had been hacked, while a hospital spokesperson confirmed that the incident had actually taken place. Nonetheless, the post was shared at least 200,000 times, including by high-profile journalists and politicians.

In an investigation, the fact-checking organisation FullFact found no evidence that the sharing was done by bots, suggesting instead that “what can appear to be bot-like behaviour is often carried out by real humans” – in this case, older and less social media literate users who simply wanted to share the news. If accurate, this indicates that Conservative supporters were keen to spread this story because it resonated with *their* deep story – the idea that the opposition might wilfully manipulate the news to influence the election.

More than anything, the controversy over Jack in Leeds General Infirmary dramatises the instability of truth claims in an emotionally charged social media ecology, and the continued vital role of conventional news media in their insistence on sticking to the facts.

Unleashing optimism in an age of anxiety

"Unleashing Britain's potential" was a recurring message of the Conservative Party in the 2019 General Election. Johnson's use of this thumbs-up approach to electioneering represents a continuation of his public image built up over the years, where his seemingly un-spun qualities as a fearless, positive, can-do politician have been key to his ability to connect with the public. In an age of precarity and social division, when so many feel *bad*, his recourse to the language of *feeling good* also reflects the close relationship between the performativity of celebrity politicians and the emotionalisation of politics today, where the language of positive psychology is often deployed in the service of stretching the truth and denying reality. As Hannah Arendt argues, lies have always been part of the politician's armory, and it is important to understand the affective dimensions of that process – especially in the current populist climate, where emotions such as 'optimism' or 'positivity' may be mobilised in an unthinking way to manage the tensions of complexity and relieve the pressure of having to make a thoughtful choice between say, leaving or remaining in Europe.

The aggressive connotations of the term "unleash" is revealing in this context and it is worth noting that according to the British National Corpus, its use on the News on the Web (NOW) has increased from 897 in 2015 to 4071 in 2019. In its modern usage, it is often associated with the battle cry: "Unleash the dogs of war!", which was a phrase used in relation to the aerial attacks of World War 2. However, its roots go back further to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, when in Act 3, Scene 1, following the murder of Caesar, Mark Anthony declares: "Cry 'Havoc' and let slip the Dogs of War!". To unleash positive potential is therefore a sentiment that carries in its wake the drama of political betrayal, murder and revenge. The latter seems a far cry from the image of sunny optimism projected by Johnson in public appearances, where we see him grinning at the cameras with his arms outstretched and his thumbs turned upwards like a boyish Roman Emperor signalling for the games to begin.

The message of unleashing optimism has a number of affective connotations which are symptomatic of the wider structures of feeling that operate in the current psycho-political landscape. During the election and in contrast to the apparently dour style of the Labour Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, Johnson's up-beat performance seemed to tap into an unconscious register of desire associated with Freudian descriptions of the pleasure principle. The latter was also an important component of the carnivalesque Leave campaign, where fiscal concerns were swept aside as the leavers joyously stuck two fingers up to those in charge. The Conservative Party election focus on 'unleashing Britain's potential' also signalled

a similar attitude to that of the Leave campaign because of its inability to face the painful realities of both the present, and the past and the less than positive legacy of its own government with its policies of austerity.

Much has been made of Johnson's *penchant* for bending the truth in order to promote his version of events, and his capacity for disavowal and denial constitutes an extension of that deceptive practice. So what feelings are being denied and therefore managed by Johnson in his presentation of optimism and positivity? In an era of volatile emotional politics, Johnson manages to ward off any potential Nietzschean *ressentiment* of his position as a high-profile politician by representing himself as an un-im-pinging figure that people can enjoy. As I and Lita Crociani-Windland argue in a forthcoming piece in *Free Associations*: "*ressentiment*, refers to a poisonous, but pleasurable form of resentment, that can be politically manipulated, amplified and given an object on which to discharge the unpleasant affect". Johnson is skillful in mobilising this mode of affect to his own advantage by projecting it elsewhere. For example, he mocks the pomposity of those in the establishment and any notion of governance associated with his role as a senior politician is thus undercut and deflected onto what he sees as his dull and out of touch opponents, and the so-called "elite", of which, of course, he is also a member. Those who oppose him and his party are labelled as traitors and former colleagues are purged. The scapegoating of women, EU nationals and ethnic minorities are part of this same affective process, whereby they and not he become the object of contempt and ridicule. Therefore, the so-called unleashing of optimism and of Britain's new potential also lets slip a new form of dog whistle politics to great effect.



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Voters, polls and results

Boris' missing women

Conservatives will undoubtedly be celebrating their victory. Yet, going forward, there is a group of voters they must make sure they do not forget – women, and particularly young women. Of course, we should always be cautious of rhetoric of the 'women's vote', not least because women are not a homogenous group. However, there are some differences in Johnson's relationship with the male versus the female voter. Throughout the election campaign, polling showed that Johnson was less popular with women. In one YouGov poll there was a 10 percentage-point gap with 41% of men saying Boris Johnson was a good leader compared to 31% of women. There are several possible explanations.

Firstly, it could be further evidence of the beginning of a modern gender gap in the British electorate. Whereas women were historically more likely to support conservative parties, since the 1980s we have seen a reversal of this trend in many counties with the modern gender gap seeing women more supportive of left-wing parties than men. This trend began to appear in the UK during the 2015 and 2017 elections. Anna Sanders and Rosalind Shorrick have shown how this gap was driven by younger women (under 35) who are more anti-austerity and thus less supportive of the Conservatives. YouGov polling suggest young women in particular dislike Johnson with 17% of women under 40 saying Johnson was a good leader compared to 30% of young men and 40% of women over 40.

These policy preferences could explain women's lesser enthusiasm for Johnson. Compared to men, women are less supportive of spending cuts to public services, even among supporters of right-wing parties. Women also give priority to the NHS and healthcare. Johnson's consistent message of 'getting Brexit done' at any cost may also have affected his favourability amongst women. Women are less likely to be hard Eurosceptic than men and are more concerned about the consequences of a 'No Deal' exit.

Further to this, the masculine imagery of Boris Johnson and his attitude to women should be considered. Since taking over the leadership there have been accusations of sexist language from Johnson. He called David Cameron 'a girly swot' and was reprimanded for sexist language in the House by Speaker John Bercow. Johnson's bolshie masculine style in the election campaign included smashing through a wall on a JCB digger and being pictured in boxing gloves with 'get Brexit done' imprinted on them. His overtly masculine style is similar to that of Nigel Farage, who is similarly unpopular amongst women. Amber Rudd, who said there was a 'whiff of sexism' around the willingness to back Johnson's deal and not May's pointed out how there are 'certain behaviours that particularly men in politics want to see, that women don't do much,

and that Boris did adopt' which may have helped with Eurosceptic colleagues' support. This kind of populist approach to politics seen on the right in Europe and US does tend to be more popular with men.

To overcome his problem with women one of the first things Johnson could do is ensure his party catch up on female representation. The Labour Party now has more female MPs than men, as do the Liberal Democrats, the SNP have one-third women. The Conservatives still lag behind the other parties at 24% women. Whilst there is mixed evidence on whether women vote for women, having more female MPs has advantages in symbolic and substantive representation and can result in more policies that benefit women. Addressing the female electorate's concerns could cement Johnson's electoral base in the future.



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An expected surprise? An evaluation of polls and seat forecasts during the campaign



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The election result came as a surprise to many people. Boris Johnson himself was reported to have been stunned by the scale of his majority as revealed by the 10pm exit poll, while John McDonnell acknowledged that the same poll had come as a shock to him. The starkness of that 10 o'clock prediction of 368 seats for the Conservatives against a mere 191 for the Labour Party also caught the breath of members of the public, with *The Telegraph* posting a video capturing the “audible gasps” of onlookers in front on the big screen outside of BBC headquarters in London.

This leaves us to ponder whether the election was well-predicted. Let's begin by taking a closer look at the polls. We collected a total of 70 poll-based vote projections, capturing what we believe to be all published, national-level polls reported during the campaign period. In order to evaluate these figures, we use a metric called Mean Absolute Error (MAE), which captures the extent to which polling figures deviated from the eventual result in terms of party vote shares.

Overall, 2019's polls produced an average MAE of 2.2%, representing a marked improvement on the equivalent 3.2% figure from 2017. Furthermore, the polls became noticeably more accurate as the election approached, in line with conventional theory. If we look at the 20 polls released in the final week of the campaign, the average MAE lowers to just 1.4%.

One of the most notable polling trends, discussed in detail by Fisher and Snow, was “the extent to which polls differ primarily between pollsters, with relatively little change over time for each pollster”. This runs contrary to previous UK elections where a phenomenon known as ‘herding’ saw pollsters reluctant to publish individual findings that deviated from aggregate patterns. In the final analysis, we can therefore see a significant divergence in accuracy from one polling company to another – with, for example, BMG more than twice as inaccurate (with an average MAE of 3%) as the top-performing major company: Ipsos MORI (with an average MAE of 1.4%).

The strong performance of the pollsters provided a solid foundation for forecasters seeking to predict party seat shares. Because of the capricious nature of the UK's electoral system, predicting seat distributions is not a straightforward enterprise. One common approach is to map between-party vote swings implied by a poll onto the previous constituency-level voting patterns (using the simplifying assumption that swing will be uniform across all seats). From this process, our 70 polls produced an average seat forecast of 350 for the Conservatives. The substantive political conclusion of a Conservative majority was replicated across 66 (or 94.3%) of our 70 polls. Applying the same procedure for 2017's polls, only 18.6% had suggested a hung parliament.

This type of prediction was widely replicated across alternative methods – for instance Fisher, Kenny and Shorrocks noted that a combination of betting market forecasts and votes-to-seats models ranged between predictions of 343 to 351 seats for the Conservative Party. YouGov's multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) model, which had been lauded for being ahead of the curve in predicting a hung parliament in 2017, forecast a slightly tighter outcome in its final iteration – landing on a Conservative seat prediction of 339. The most misleading major seat forecast came from members of the Political Studies Association, whose average prediction of 324 Conservative seats was well under most other forecasts and would have represented a radically different political outcome than the eventual result.

As such, a substantial Conservative majority was a broadly well-predicted result. The polls were largely accurate (albeit with considerable deviation across polling companies) and an array of methods which set out to forecast seat shares also performed well, even if the eventual figure of 365 for the Conservative Party was slightly higher than most predictions.

So, how do we explain the paradox of an expected surprise? To do so, we must consider the ‘narrative’ element of how polls and forecasts are reported. Recent election shocks in the UK have led to greater caution in trumpeting results among experts, while a narrative of a close and/or tightening election in fact suited both main parties – with the Conservatives guarding against complacency and Labour seeking to maintain hope. Posts on social media showing large numbers of young people lined up at polling stations on election day fed into this pre-baked narrative. In the end, however, this was an election result that was in line with the reasonable expectations of those who followed the polls.

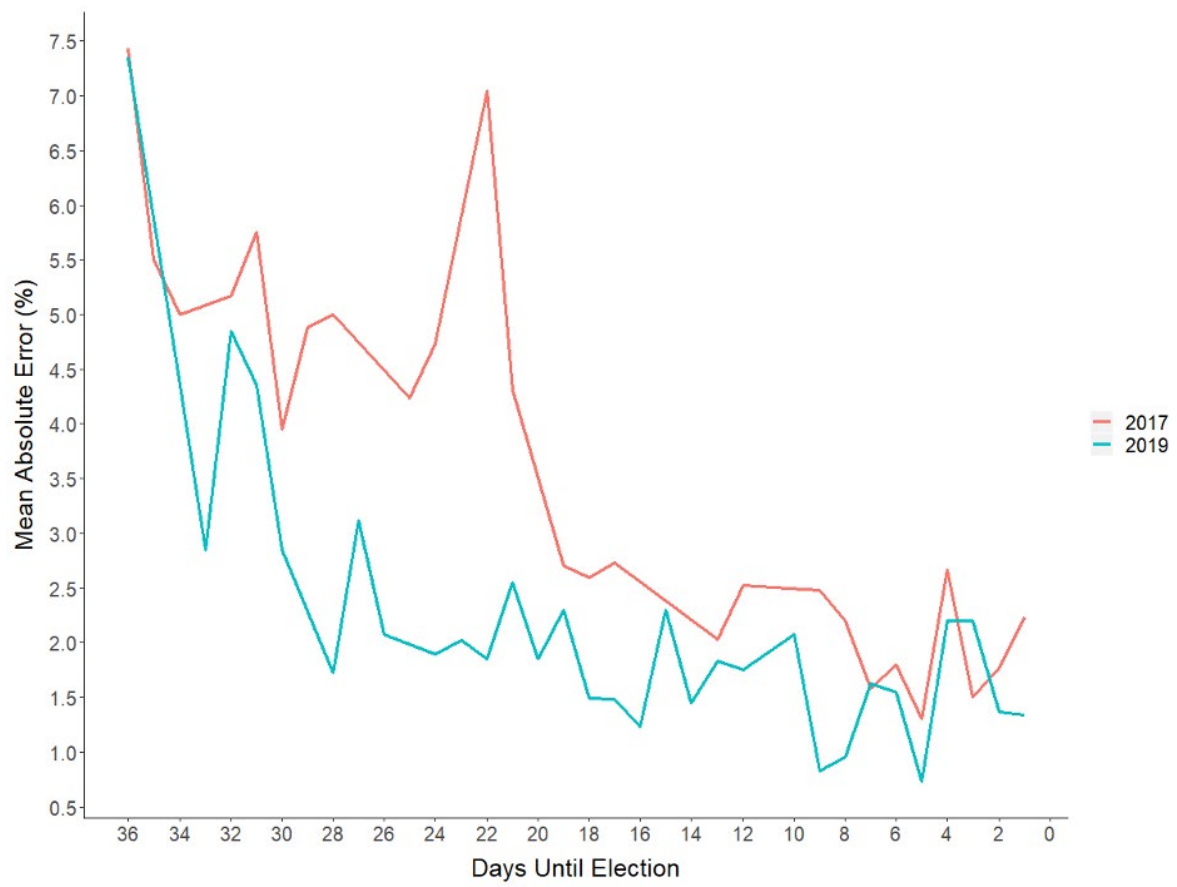


Figure 1: The average MAE of in-campaign polls during the 2017 and 2019 general elections.

Unprecedented interest or more of the same?

Turnout in the 2019 election



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When Britain's first winter election since February 1974 (and its first December election since 1923) was called for 12 December 2019, there was some speculation that turnout would fall substantially. Would voters, already tired out by three general elections and one referendum in the space of four years, be willing to go to the polls on a cold, dark winter's day - potentially in bad weather - in the run-up to Christmas?

On polling day itself, however, early reports seemed to belie those gloomy predictions. From quite early in the morning, stories began to circulate about unprecedented voter interest and of long queues forming outside polling stations. In some areas, pictures shared online showed these queues snaking round the block. Was the UK emerging out of a twenty-year period of relatively low electoral turnouts and heading back to participation rates more typical of the years from 1945 to 1997? And, if this was happening, what might it mean for the election result?

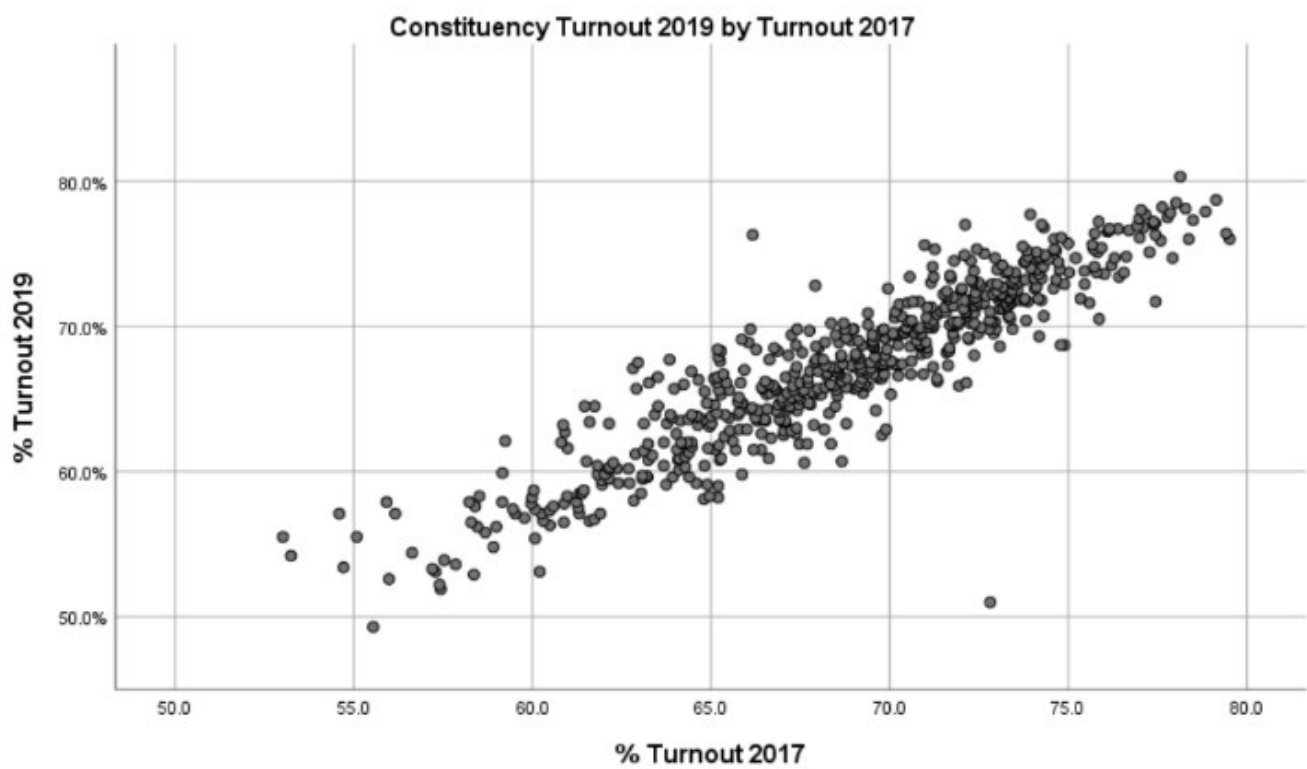
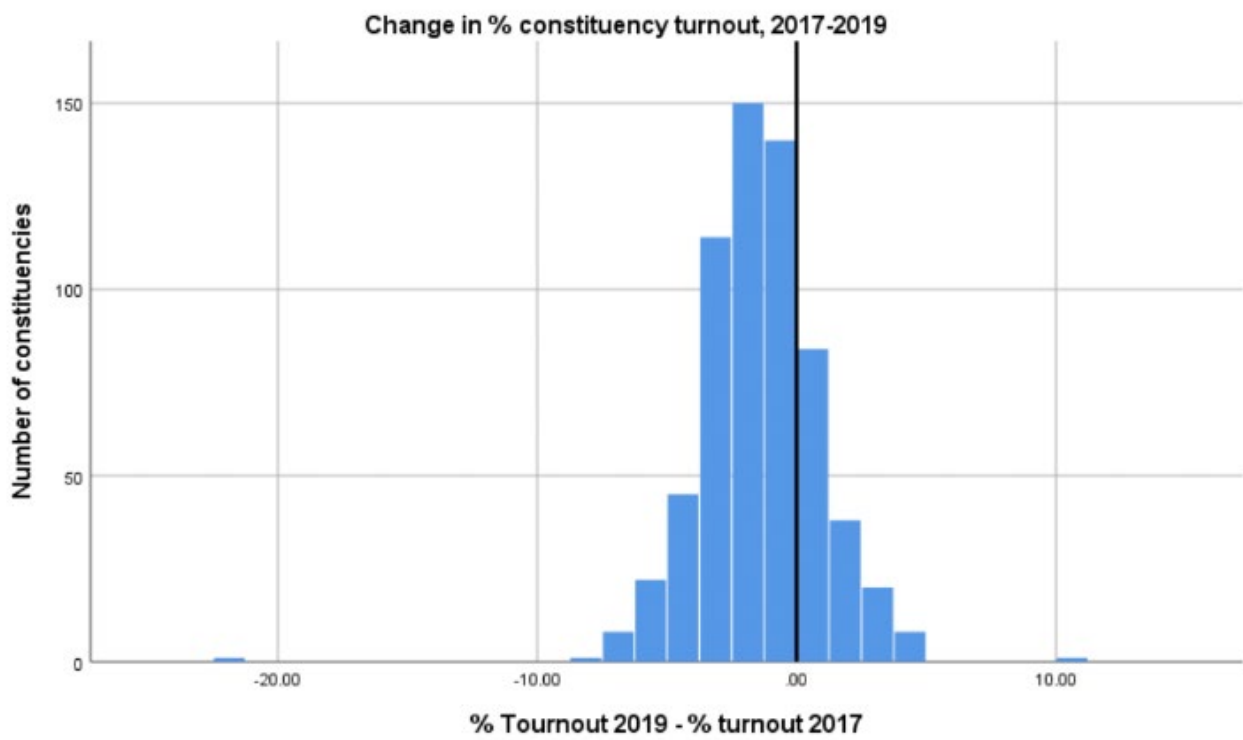
In the event, however, expectations for either much lower or much higher than expected turnout proved misplaced. Far from heading sharply upwards, turnout, at 67.3%, was actually lower than in 2017 (when it reached 68.7%, the highest level recorded since 1997, though still well below the post-war average). This put an end to a 4-election run of (slowly) rising participation from the post-war low point of the 2001 election. The long queues may have been more a result of the number of polling stations, and of voters' desire to vote in daylight rather than in the dark and cold of a mid-winter night, than of any new-found engagement with politics.

At the constituency level, too, the 2019 turnout story was a case of same old same old! Turnout in Britain varied from a low of 49.3% in Kington up Hull East to a high of 80.3% in East Dunbartonshire (the closely-fought seat defended by Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson, and lost to the SNP by only 149 votes). The overall range in turnout was very similar to that seen two years previously (when it ranged from 53% in Glasgow North East to 79% in Twickenham). And few constituencies saw major change in turnout between 2017 and 2019, as illustrated in this histogram of the percentage point increase or decrease in turnout between 2017 and 2019. The thick vertical line shows where the two turnouts were identical. To the left of that line are constituencies where turnout fell, and to the right are seats where it rose: the height of the bars shows the number of constituencies at each step along the way. Turnout fell in most constituencies (there is more of the graph to the left of the 'zero change' line than to the right), but in most cases the change was modest - only a few percentage points either way. There are two dramatic outliers - but they are quickly explained. On the far left of the graph, with

a decline in turnout of 21.1 percentage points, is Chorley, the constituency represented by Lindsay Hoyle, the newly elected Speaker of the Commons. To the right is Buckingham, where turnout jumped by 10 percentage points, and where the outgoing MP was John Bercow, the previous Speaker. As the Speaker's constituency is, by tradition, not contested by the major parties, these dramatic shifts are easily accounted for - by the absence of most parties in Speaker Hoyle's seat and the sudden increase in the number of candidates in the seat formerly held by Speaker Bercow. But those unusual cases aside, changes were modest.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a very (very) strong predictor of the turnout rate in a seat in 2019 was the turnout there in 2017, as our second diagram illustrates. For those of a statistical turn of mind, the regression equation which describes the pattern in the diagram has an r^2 of 0.83 (confirming that past turnout was a very major factor in understanding the rate in 2019), and the slope coefficient was 1.05 - in other words, the relative position of each constituency barely changed, and the slight drop in turnout was pretty similar across the two elections almost everywhere.

Expectations of either a particularly low turnout election or of a high-intensity, highly engaged contest were both confounded, therefore. Britain's voters turned out in much the same proportions in 2019 as in most recent elections - and turnout remains below the levels routinely seen before 2001. Whatever the other dramas produced by the 2019 campaign, aggregate turnout was not one of them.



Cartographic perspectives of 2019 General Election



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If the 2016 vote for Brexit is described as a political earthquake in the United Kingdom, then the 2019 General Election is the equivalent to the tsunami that followed it and swept over some of the deepest Labour heartlands in England. Political commentators spoke of a demolition of the Labour Party's 'red wall' as the results came in (although the 'wall' that may have once stood had already started to crumble in previous elections). Approaching the outcome of the General Election from a visual perspective puts such metaphors into a visual representation.

This cartographic analysis provides an assessment of the impact of some key data of this election. The mapping techniques used in this analysis are deployed to create more comprehensive insights than conventional approaches usually provide. Apart from visualising the election statistics on a 'normal' geographic view that shows the country's land area, two different variations of so-called cartograms are used. The second map type is a hexagonal cartogram where each hexagon shape represents one parliamentary constituency, therefore reflecting the seat distribution in the new parliament (for technical reasons, some minor changes in constituencies in recent years are reflected in split and merged hexagons). The third map type is a gridded population cartogram where each small area is shown proportional to its total population that lives there. While the electorate is a smaller fraction of the total population, this map gives a view of how the entire population in each area is represented through the respective political party that was elected there.

Although the two cartograms have a similar conceptual approach, their overall appearance and therefore their underlying message differs, not least because constituencies vary in size (by area and population) and therefore also in the number of people that they represent.

For the unfamiliar eye, cartograms are more difficult to read and interpret than the normal map. However, the normal map highly overrepresents the large rural areas and makes it difficult to understand the patterns in the most populated areas that have equal importance when it comes to understanding the political implications of an election outcome.

In this feature, all three map types are shown alongside each other for each variable mapped here. Shown is a selected range of key aspects that arise from the vote. This allows for a comparison of these through the different cartographic perspectives.

The maps showing the winning party in each constituency also include the changes that have occurred compared to the 2017 General Election. To account for the substantial changes in the last parliament with regards to members of parliament (MPs) changing their party affiliation (voluntarily or forced), the changes considered here reflect

the most recent affiliation of an MP immediately before the election.

Although the political system in the UK is based on a first-past-the-post representation, a look at the second placed candidates that stood for election is relevant. Some of the constituencies were won with a very small majority. 30 constituencies had a majority of under 1000 votes, another 32 were won with less than 2000 votes difference, which demonstrates what differences such small margins can make for the overall outcome in a first past the post system.

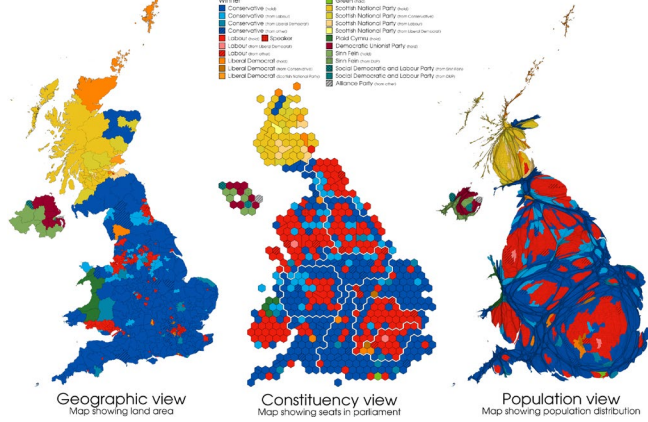
When viewing the maps of winners and second placed parties alongside each other, it becomes clear from the patchwork of colours shown here that despite a Conservative landslide win the country remains very much split politically.

The Conservative vote has spread widely at this election, as can be seen in more detail in the vote share maps included here for the Conservatives and Labour. Nevertheless, former Labour strongholds are still not completely in Conservative hands and the cartograms relativise the 'disappearance' of the Labour vote slightly in its magnitude.

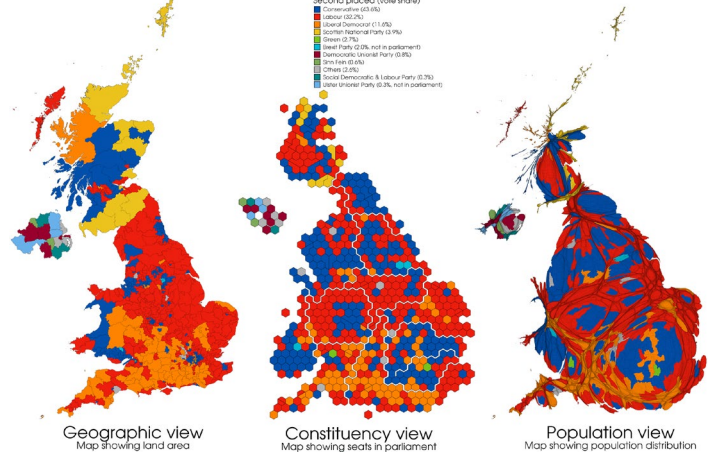
Lastly, what was portrayed as election fatigue amongst voters has affected parties to different degrees. In this third general election within 4½ years, overall turnout went down by 1.5 per cent to 63.7 per cent of registered voters. The spatial patterns of this are patchy and changes in turnout were perhaps not decisive, although it can be seen that in many seats won by the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party turnout went up, while in many Conservative and Labour-won areas it was more likely to be down compared to the 2017 election.

These maps tell manifold stories of the 2019 election that are most likely to determine and shape the politics of the forthcoming years. How this matters geographically as indicated in this brief analysis is an important aspect in understanding the political implications of the election and – to stay with analogies from nature – the political storms that many commentators expect to follow.

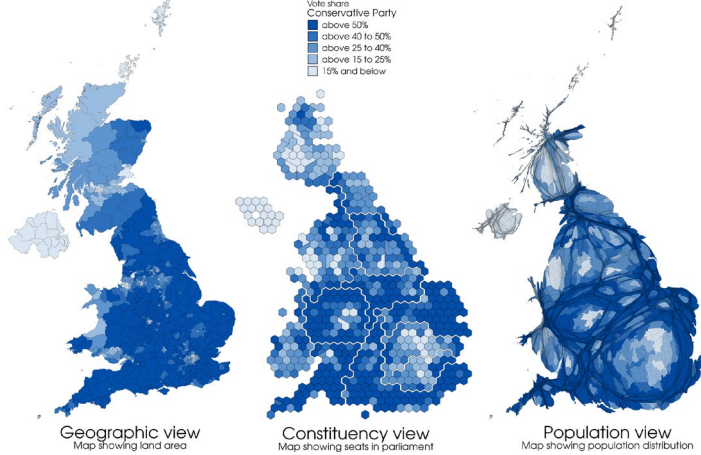
Winning party and political changes



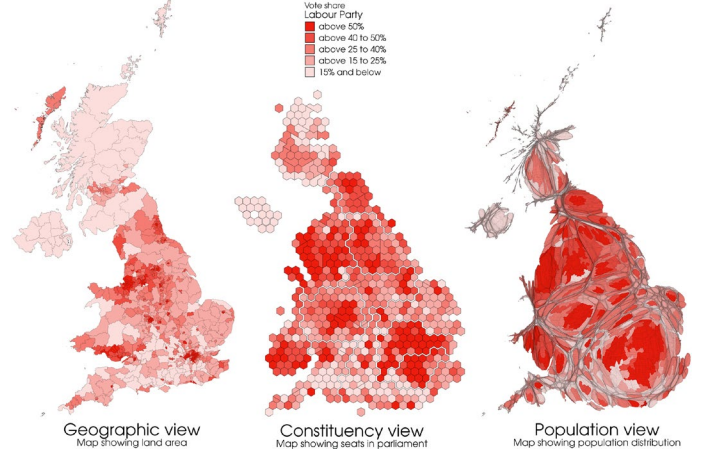
Second placed party



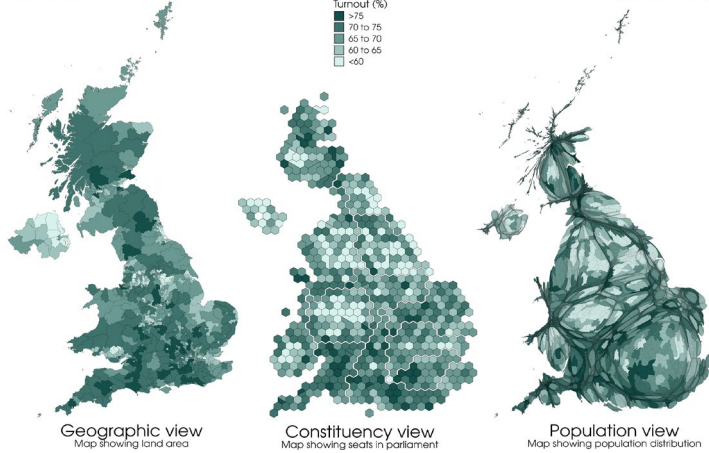
Vote share of the Conservative party



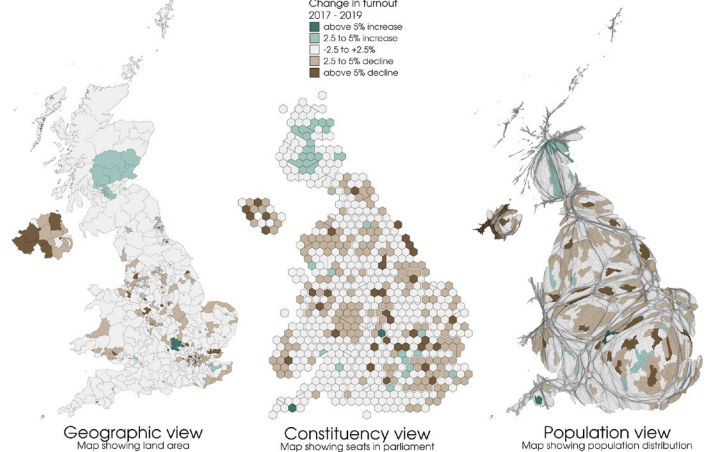
Vote share of the Labour party



Voter turnout



Changes in turnout between 2017 and 2019



Tactical voting advice sites



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The dispersion of the Remain vote between multiple competing parties created strong incentives for coordination in 2019. Three “Remain” parties (the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and Plaid Cymru) were able to coordinate at the elite level, agreeing a joint candidate in 60 seats, but this coordination was limited in comparison to the Brexit Party’s decision to stand aside in Conservative held-seats. In order to fill this “coordination gap”, several websites offering tactical voting advice sprung up.

Who were they?

It is not possible to list all these tactical voting advice sites which were created, so I discuss four sites which were particularly important during the campaign:

- getvoting.org, a site backed by Best for Britain, a campaign group “committed to finding a democratic way to stop Brexit”, chaired by former Labour minister Mark Malloch Brown, and set up before the 2017 general election.
- remainunited.org, a group set up by Gina Miller, the main litigant in the UK Supreme Court case *Miller v. Secretary of State for Exiting the EU*, and a former member of Best for Britain. Miller left Best for Britain shortly after the 2017 election, saying that the group had become more about stopping the Conservatives than stopping Brexit.
- peoples-vote.uk, a group with a strong degree of overlap with the 2016 Remain campaign, and which saw a significant staff mutiny during the course of the campaign.
- tactical.vote, “a project by the grassroots @votetools collective”, and which distinguished itself by providing a meta-analysis of recommendations made by different tactical voting campaigns.

How did they work?

Two sites (getvoting.org and remainunited.org) estimated current public opinion using multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP), a technique for estimating opinion in small areas using large national samples. In most cases they recommended the non-Conservative candidate who was best placed according to this analysis. Because MRP relies on polling data, and because polling data can become out of date, these sites changed their recommendations over time. For example: the first Best for Britain recommendations were published on 3rd November, and were updated again on 28th November and 9th December.

tactical.vote made recommendations on the basis of 2017 election results. They recommended the best placed non-Conservative candidate, except where the Conservatives were a distant third place (in which case they make no recommendation), or where the seat is judged “unusual” (like the Speaker’s seat, or seats with independent candidates).

peoples-vote.uk made artisanal recommendations based on “talking to candidates... consulting leading pollsters, and analysing the results of local,

European and national elections”.

How were they received?

The recommendations from Best for Britain were greeted with skepticism. This was motivated in part by the large number of recommendations to vote Liberal Democrat, concern over the freshness of the data, and some misunderstanding of how MRP works. As tactical voting advice sites multiplied over the course of the campaign, attention focused on constituencies where the sites offered differing recommendations, giving rise to articles with titles like “Can you trust tactical voting sites?”. This ignored the fact that most sites recommended the same party, and that most of the seats with differing recommendations were difficult to call by any measure. By the end of the campaign, most sites agreed on a large number of constituencies (see Table 1). Because Labour support grew over the course of the campaign whilst Liberal Democrat support shrunk, earlier differences between tactical.vote and MRP-based sites diminished.

getvoting.org and tactical.vote were more popular than remainunited.org or peoples-vote.uk. Best for Britain claimed that their site had 3.8 million unique visitors; the site’s Alexa page rank on the morning before the election (332,947) was beaten only by tactical.vote (231,484). These estimates very roughly match estimates from the British Election Studies team, who reported that 6% of respondents (2.75 million people when expressed as a proportion of the adult population) listed tactical voting websites as a source of information they use when considering how to vote.

What effects did they have?

The way in which Best for Britain based their recommendations on the result of an MRP model allows a neat test of their influence. If, for example, we were just to examine the swings towards the Liberal Democrat in seats where Best for Britain recommended the Liberal Democrats, we might over-estimate the site’s influence because the Liberal Democrats were always fated to do well in those seats, and the MRP model picked up on it. If, however, we compare seats in which Best for Britain just recommended the Liberal Democrats, because they were fractionally ahead their nearest Remain competitor in the MRP analysis, compared to seats where they were fractionally behind, then we can estimate the effect of the endorsement alone. This regression discontinuity design (see Fig. 1) shows that the effect of endorsements by Best for Britain was around four and a half percentage points. This is a huge effect – around two times the incumbency bonus, for example – but is robust to the inclusion of controls for incumbency and the presence of Plaid or Green candidates. Tactical voting advice seems to work and work well.

Site	tactical.vote	Remain United	People's Vote	Best for Britain	Remain United (Nov.)	Best for Britain (Nov.)
tactical.vote	100	99	95	96	70	57
Remain United		100	95	95	67	56
People's Vote			100	98	69	59
Best for Britain				100	68	58
Remain United (Nov.)					100	95
Best for Britain (Nov.)						100

Table 1: Rates of agreement between different tactical voting sites as percentages. Rates of agreement exclude "None" or "Any" recommendations.

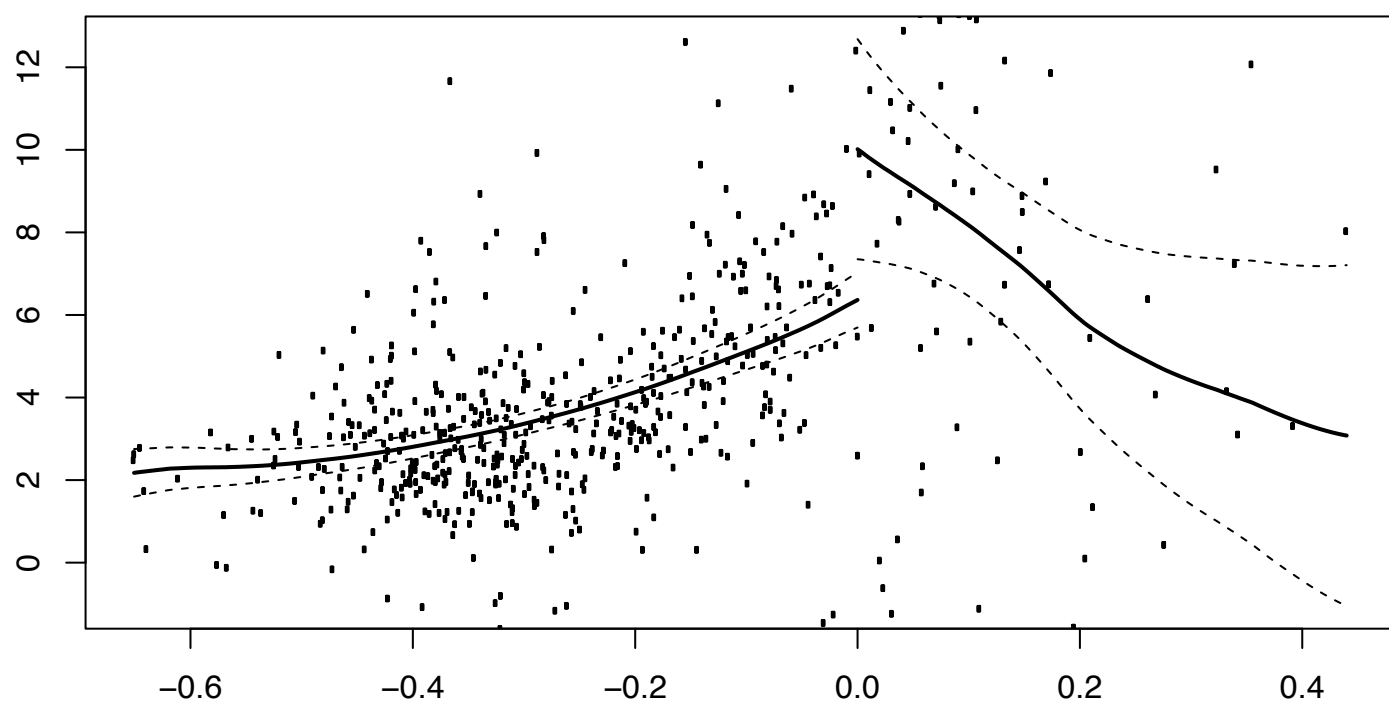


Figure 1: Lib Dem position relative to the best placed non-Lib Dem Remain party (horizontal axis) against the change in the Liberal Democrat vote. At the point where the Lib Dems are ahead of the next best-placed Remain party, there is a sudden jump in the change in the Lib Dem vote

Another election, another disappointment: Young people vote left and are left behind at GE2019



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The 2019 General Election demonstrated once again that age rather than social class is the key cleavage dividing the electorate across contemporary Britain. The results also reaffirmed that the terms of this dominance of age over election outcomes are changing. For instance, election turnouts since 1997 have been very generational affairs, albeit demonstrating significant intragenerational differences. However, where previously these elections were characterised by the strong turnout of older citizens and a significant degree of abstention by the nation's youth, more recent voting events suggest that youth could be attracted to the polls. In particular, 75 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds voted at the Scottish 2014 Independence Referendum and 60 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted at the 2016 European Union Referendum.

In our 2019 Open Access book, "Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain", we highlighted a huge surge in youth political engagement. First of all, there was a spike in youth turnout (amongst 18 to 24 year olds), rising to the highest level for a quarter of a century. Second, we identified a dramatic rise in support for Labour amongst young voters, founded on a growth in social liberal or 'cosmopolitan' values.

However, the 2019 outcome must have appeared as a groundhog event for the large majority of young voters. As in 2017, many will have been left deeply disappointed that their votes, preferences and priorities will have counted for relatively little in shaping the future course of British politics as the Conservative party steam-rolled through traditional Labour-voting constituencies.

Against this trend, young people opted for Labour, increasingly so over the course of the campaign. At the outset, YouGov's October poll indicated that Labour was dominating the youth vote; but with 38%, this was significantly down on their 2017 final-day vote (62%). However, this increased to 51% in their November 2019 poll and then to 55% in their December pre-election poll – a gap of 33% over the Conservatives. Elsewhere, Ipsos Mori's final estimate indicated that Labour held a 26-point lead over the Conservatives among 18-34s.

Data from the Lord Ashcroft election day poll of those already voted offer a clear indication of this intergenerational divide with respect to party preferences. As Figure 1 indicates, the final youth vote was overwhelmingly cast in support for a progressive politics. Thus, two thirds of those aged 18-24 voted for broadly left-ist, anti-austerity and cosmopolitan parties such as Labour (57%), Greens (5%) and the SNP (4%). In addition, a further 12% voted for the pro-Remain LibDems. This resulted in a Labour lead over the Conservatives of 38 points – larger than the historic 35-point gap recorded in 2017.

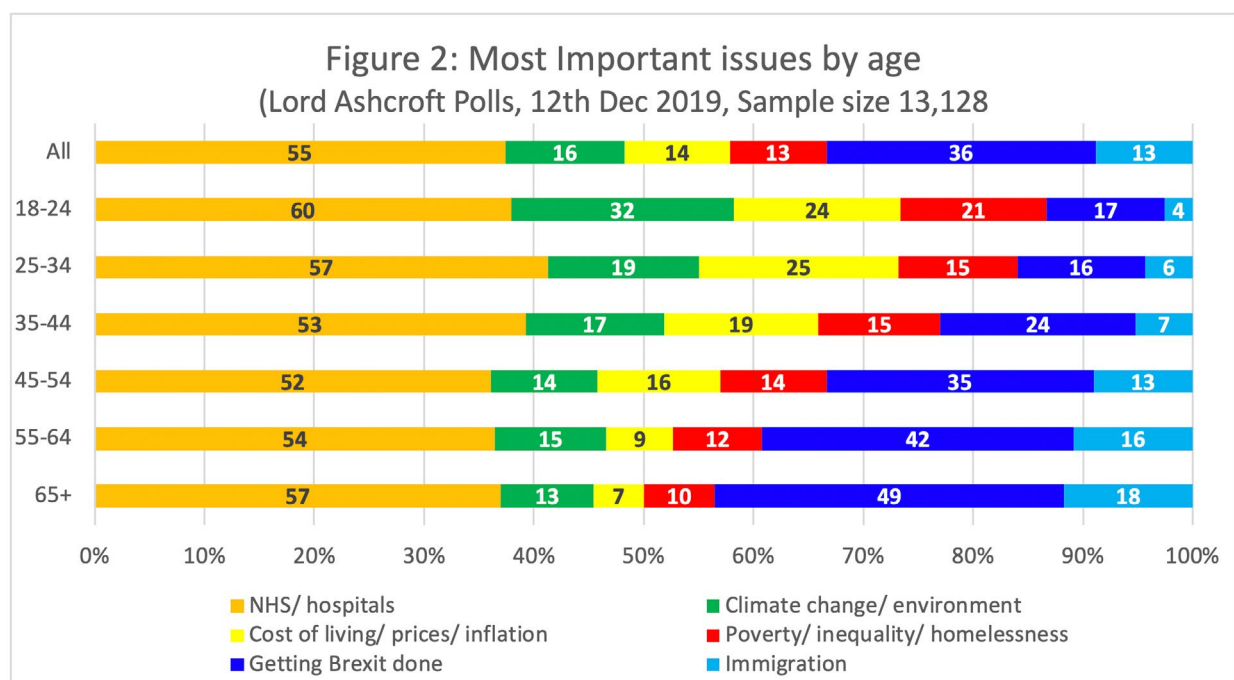
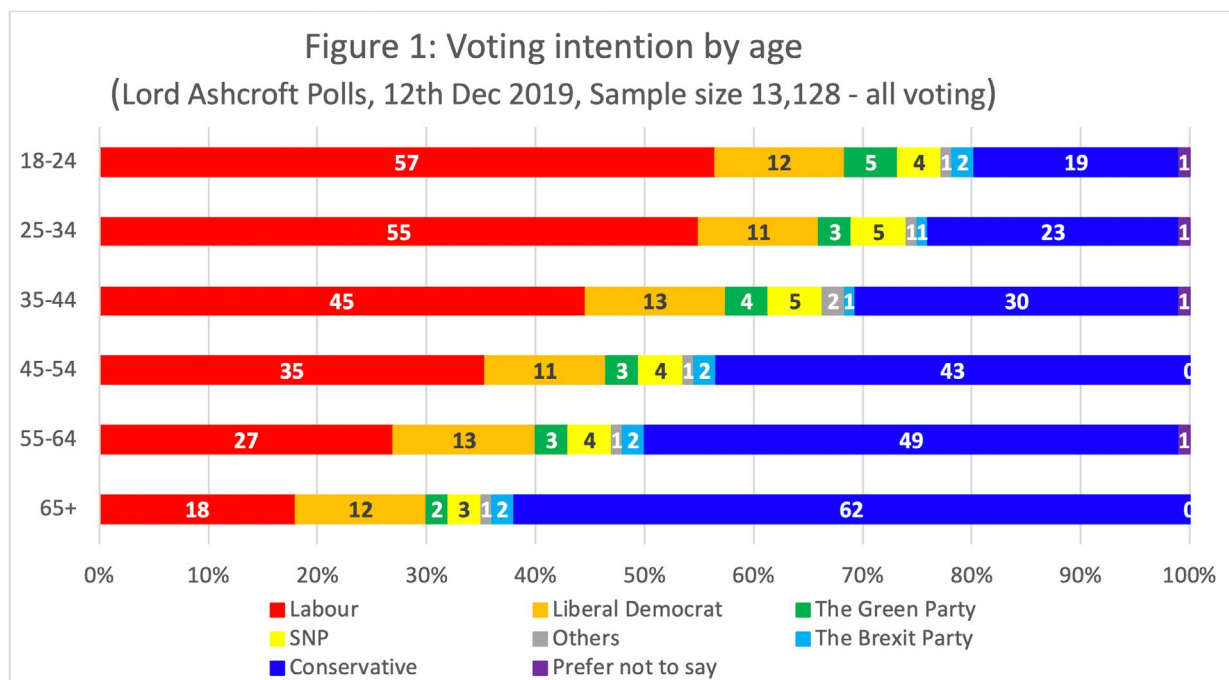
As we explained in our book, the period effect

of the 2017 youthquake rippled up the generations. In part, we can see this occurring in 2019 when we compare the political allegiances of 18-24s with those aged 25-34 and 35-44. Each of these two older age groups indicated considerable majority support for Labour, Greens and SNP. By way of contrast, support amongst older voters for Labour reached an all-time low – falling to only 18% amongst those aged 65-plus.

Finally, the party preferences of young people at #GE2019 reflect their issue priorities – including, but not limited to their profound concerns about the deepening climate crisis and social injustice. As Figure 2 reveals, there are intergenerational differences on several key issues – and some of these are considerable. For instance, after the NHS, the second most important issue identified by the 18-24s was climate change/environment, with nearly three times as many young people prioritising this compared to the 65-plus group (ranked at 8th place). Social justice concerns including poverty, inequality and homelessness were twice as important to 18-24s as for those aged 55 or over, and the cost of living was three times as important.

Attitudes to Brexit and to immigration offered clear indicators of young people's *cosmopolitan* orientations. The 18-24s were significantly less concerned about the desire to "get Brexit done" (only 17%) than were those aged 65+ who prioritised it over all other issues (49%) except the NHS. Furthermore, young people were far more relaxed about immigration (4%) than were the over-65s (18%).

Early evidence from the 2019 UK General Election offers a picture of a continued deepening of the intergenerational divide underpinning British politics. In particular, while the nation lurched to the right, many young people continued to be attracted to parties offering anti-austerity, environmental and cosmopolitan programmes. While they may feel that by voting left they have effectively been left-behind, their recent engagement in the global climate protests suggests that many young people have an outlet to actualise their political interests.



Divided we fall: was Nigel Farage the kingmaker of the Johnson victory?



Prof Pippa Norris

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There has been relatively little discussion in the media about the Brexit Party. After all, they ended with a paltry 2.0% of the UK vote (5% in the seats they contested) and no MPs. UKIP performed even worse, with 22,817 votes (0.1%). Farage's euroskeptic clothes, and thus rationale, were stolen by Boris Johnson. But did the Brexit Party have a greater impact on the results of the election than they gain credit for? The Conservative share of the UK vote under Johnson, after all, went up only 1.4% across the country, almost unchanged from May's 2017 result; Johnson's landslide victory therefore had less to do with his popularity or the strength of the Conservative campaign but a collapse in Labour's vote. Given turnout was similar to 2017, where did this vote go?

Figure 1 illustrates how UKIP, and then the successor Brexit Party, both experienced roller-coaster rides in successive local, European and general elections. UKIP ran 378 candidates in the June 2017 general election - but won just half a million votes (1.8% of the total), with no seats. Despite this wipe-out, the major parties, especially the Conservatives, were rocked by the initial electoral success of the Brexit Party, which won the largest share of the UK national vote and seats in the May 2019 party-list European Parliamentary elections, just four months after founding. Most strikingly, the party swept up almost half of the over-65s. The opinion polls registered around 23% support for the Brexit party at their peak a few weeks later, in mid-June 2019, when they were tied or even a point or two ahead of the two major parties.

As the Leave vote was squeezed and the standing of Brexit reduced, Nigel Farage decided to play the long game by competing strategically in the election only in opposition seats, asking Brexit candidates to stand down in Conservative-held seats. This served two goals: as a brand-new party, for expedient reasons, Brexit's financial and organizational resources were over-stretched. Moreover, the stated aim of this strategy was to present a united front which avoided splitting the Leave vote. This strategy had two consequences; the Brexit Party had opportunities to snatch Leave ballots in Labour-held seats, without simultaneously damaging the electoral prospects for incumbent Conservative MPs. At the same time, the Remain vote remained divided because Corbyn stubbornly ruled out any informal pact, despite discussions among the opposition parties, and various efforts to organize tactical voting. As Figure 2 illustrates, the Conservatives were flanked by the Brexit Party, but otherwise enjoyed 'clear blue water' to shovel up Leave votes on the socially-conservative and nationalist right. By contrast, the socially-liberal left parties were all clustered closely together, able to exchange votes with each other but thereby dividing the spoils and failing to gain seats.

The effects are remarkable. In seats with a Brexit candidate, the Labour vote fell on average by -8.6%, compared with -7.3% elsewhere. There was also a modest impact with the Brexit Party taking some support from the Tories: in seats with a Brexit Party candidate, the Conservative vote went up 1.7% compared with +2.5% elsewhere. But my estimates suggest that the share of the Brexit vote was large enough to allow the Conservatives to slip in the back door and make up to twenty seat gains in former Labour seats which changed hands, thereby *doubling Johnson's eventual parliamentary majority* (see Figure 3).

Does the scale of their electoral support mean that we should write off the Brexit party as irrelevant to the outcome - or that Farage failed in his grand project? On the contrary, Farage's strategic decision to compete in Labour seats, but not in Conservative seats, was arguably decisive for the eventual outcome. The failure of attempted negotiations to agree an informal 'Remain Alliance' among opposition parties, but the division of seats between the Brexit and Conservative parties on the Leave side, was one of the prime reasons why the Labour party saw a hemorrhage of votes among many of their Leave voters in their Northern industrial heartland seats.

Figure 1: The vote and seat share for UKIP (1997-2017) and the Brexit Party (2019)

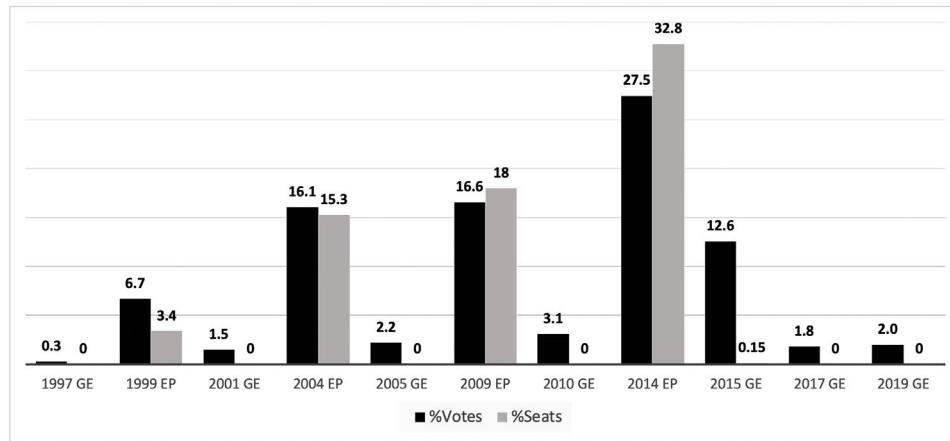
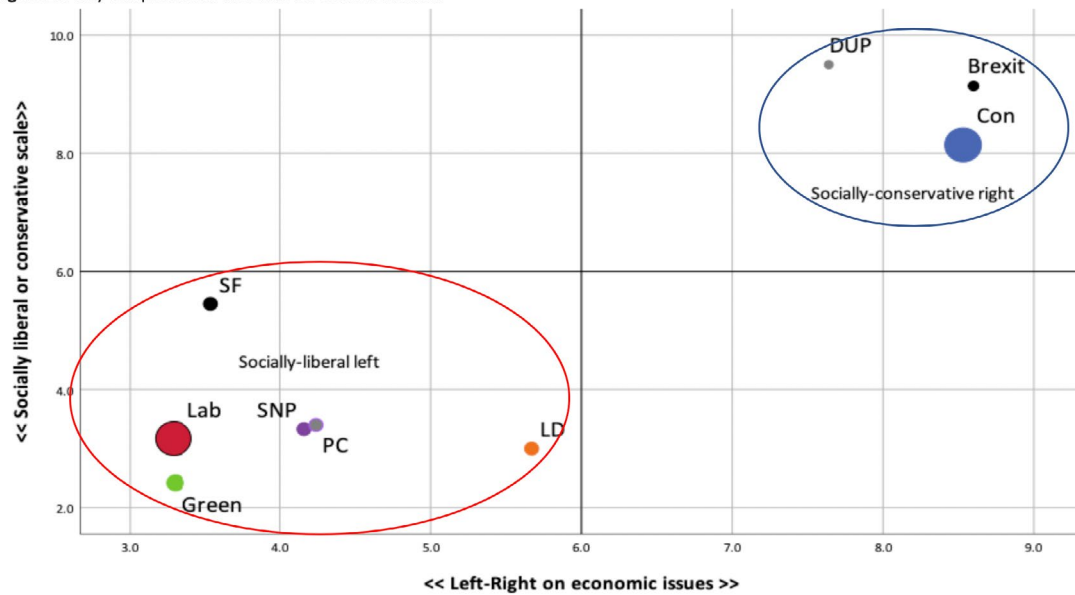


Figure 2: Party competition in the 2019 UK General Election

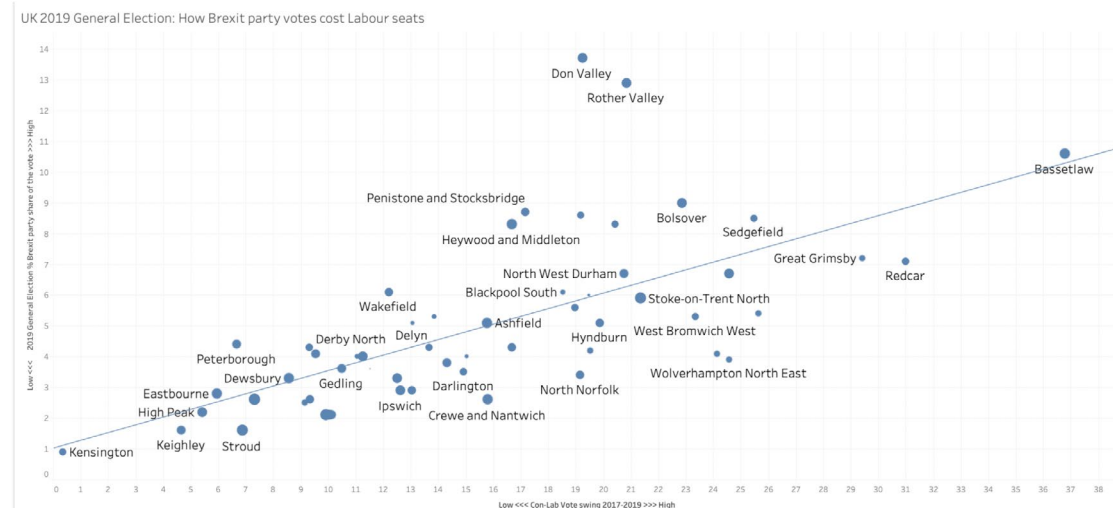


Left-Right: "Parties can be classified by their current stance on economic issues, such as privatization, taxes, regulation, government spending, and the welfare state. Those on the left want government to play an active role in the economy. Those on the economic right favor a reduced role for government. Where would you place each party on the following 0-10-point scale?"

Social liberalism or conservatism: "Parties can also be classified by their current social values. Those with liberal values favor expanded personal freedoms, for example on abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and democratic participation. Those with conservative values reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition and stability, believing that government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues. Where would you place parties on the 0-10 point scale?"

Source: Pippa Norris. *Global Party Survey*, an expert survey estimating party positions, Nov 2019 pre-release. www.GlobalPartySurvey.org

Table 3: How votes for the Brexit Party cost Labour seats



Note: This illustrates how the Con-Lab vote swing was related to the change in the UKIP/Brexit party vote share in former Labour seats gained by the Conservative party in the 2019 UK General Election.

Source: Pippa Norris. 2019. *UK Parliamentary Constituency dataset, 2010-2019*. www.pippanorris.com



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The Nations

Renewed electoral pitch for independence in Wales

Plaid Cymru did not have a standout general election. The party managed to retain its four seats, but failed to make any gains and its vote share across Wales dropped below ten percent. Plaid Cymru did succeed in one sense though. It pushed independence further up the political agenda in Wales.

Plaid Cymru wants Wales to be an independent nation. There is nothing new about that. What did change in the run up to the 2019 election though was how the party engaged with this proposition. Whereas independence was merely a footnote in Plaid Cymru's pitch to voters in 2015 and 2017, largely side-lined and put on hold for the time being, it was much more prominent in 2019. Plaid Cymru may not have built its campaign around independence to quite the same extent as the SNP did, but it was one of the party's more salient proposals nonetheless.

The general election of 2019 could start a movement towards "a new Welsh spirit of independence" said Adam Price, leader of Plaid Cymru, when launching the party's general election campaign. Their manifesto shortly followed suit, setting out proposals for significant constitutional change in Wales. Not only did it reiterate a desire for an independent Wales (in the European Union), but it also set a specific target of 2030 for achieving this objective and first concrete steps to facilitate the process in the shape of an Independence Commission. Chaired by former AM and Welsh Government minister Jocelyn Davies, it will "develop... policy to carve a clear pathway to... independence" and "draw up a written constitution for an independent Wales".

The discussion around independence has still a long way to go in Wales, especially when comparing it to the one in Scotland. There is very little detail about what an independent Wales would look like, beyond it being a member of the European Union, even in Plaid Cymru's own proposals. We do not know what kind of political institutions the party recommends, what it wants the Welsh Constitution to say, or even how exactly it foresees the independence referendum to take place. These questions, alongside many others, were left unanswered by the party's general election campaign.

Plaid Cymru's resurgent pitch for an independent Wales may lack practical detail, but we should not underestimate its importance in guiding the political agenda in Wales. Yes, independence still seems more like an ambition – just not quite as long term one as before – rather than an 'oven-ready offer', but there is now an emergence of a roadmap and a growing sense that this ambition might turn into a more tangible proposal from Plaid Cymru in the not too distant future. Coming at the backdrop of pro-independence marches and growing talk about

indy-curiosity, the changing rhetoric of Plaid Cymru further raises the profile of the issue and pushes it up the political agenda.

Is there widespread support for independence in Wales? The increased saliency of independence in Plaid Cymru's manifesto certainly did not lead to a groundswell of support as its vote share dropped to 9.9%, down from 10.4% in 2017 and 12.1% in 2015. Even if discounting seats where Plaid Cymru stood aside for Lib Dem and Green candidates, there is still no real evidence of Plaid Cymru surge in the popular vote. Recent opinion polls are more encouraging but, irrespective of how the questions on independence are asked, they still reveal only a minority support for independence. Even the most favourable recent poll – presenting a hypothetical situation where the rest of the UK leaves the European Union but Wales could remain a member if it became independent – saw only 33% saying yes to independence, with 48% saying no. Plaid Cymru's resurgent pitch for an independent Wales is not, or at least not yet, an election winner. It does signal though that the party believes there to be a political opportunity, and necessity, to push the debate around independence further.

The Conservatives were the success story in Wales at this general election, winning back Brecon and Radnorshire from the Lib Dems and taking six seats from Labour. Whilst Plaid Cymru failed to make electoral gains, its campaign pitch for independence does reflect the growing saliency of the issue in Wales.



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“It’s the constitution, eejit”: Scotland and the agenda wars



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Recent general elections in Scotland have turned on shifting configurations of the constitutional debate and national belonging. 2019 saw the tactical deployment of a variety of interpretations of constitutional dispute in Scotland, resulting in a battle of agendas. What emerged was a definitional contest that promises to reveal much on the extent of obligation between communicative salience with its implications for agenda and policy enactment.

The context of this arises from two separate referenda. The first was the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, which produced a majority to remain with the United Kingdom of 55/45 and saw the unionist Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, combine resources against the independence-supporting Green Party, Scottish National Party and Scottish Socialists. The implications of this result have extended beyond the retention of the United Kingdom to influence subsequent party fortunes. In particular, this “Better Together” coalition brought some measure of reputational damage for Labour, whose negatively framed association with the Conservatives lost them all but one of their parliamentary seats in 2015; a result repeated in 2019.

The second referendum was the 2016 Brexit vote, shared across the UK. The victory for the leave campaign had a UK-wide bearing on the election we see now, not least that the election was called amid claims of political impasse on the terms of departure. In regional terms, Scotland demurred from the UK norm on Brexit, and returned a 60/40 majority in favour of remaining with the EU.

Since Brexit, the SNP have therefore been relentless in associating the vote with their claimed right for Scotland to determine its own political future. Further, they have cited prospect of departure from the EU as the ‘material change’ needed for a repeat of the independence vote. (A *third* significant referendum, for those keeping count.)

In 2017, this strategy yielded less for the SNP than they might have liked, and they returned fewer 21 MPs, albeit from the high-water mark of 2015. However, in 2019 the SNP shifted the focus from independence as a virtue in its own right, to independence as a necessary mechanism to protect Scotland’s place within the EU. This representation of Brexit as contrary to the democratic will of the Scottish voters that can only be rectified by returning power from Westminster brought electoral success, winning 80% of seats in Scotland.

Contrarily, the Scottish Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns emphasised the prospect of yet another independence referendum, citing the SNP’s myopic nationalism and neglect of their wider governmental responsibilities in the devolved parliament. In the UK-wide delivery of a Conservative victory, 2019 will be remembered

as a sobering example of the rewards of sustaining an agenda around a simple slogan – to “get Brexit done” – and the perils of Labour’s refusal to articulate an equally straightforward response. In the Scottish context, the Conservatives found less success in meeting the threat of the SNP by denying their focus on Brexit and framing Scotland as a separate battle against further moves towards independence.

In separating issues around the devolved administration and election, the SNP were not assisted by the prominence of leader Nicola Sturgeon and her association with long-standing arguments for independence. Focussing on Sturgeon, much of the anti-independence party literature was expressed in highly personalised terms, such as the Conservative Party’s evocation of Trump’s campaign against Hillary Clinton in the repeated use of ‘Tell Her Again’. Sturgeon included, Scotland’s own hierarchy of political leaders participated in televised debates produced in Scotland by ITV and BBC. Driven by the Scottish leaders of Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the debates were dominated by the SNP’s medium-term goals of Scottish independence in a manner that hardened the focus on the individual personality and agency of Sturgeon.

While set to be portrayed as a single issue election in the UK, Scotland was a site of struggle in the determination of what this issue should be, with discursive dominance giving the power to interpret the priorities of opposing parties. From the SNP, salience was given to the future of Scotland in the EU. For the unionist parties, emphasis rested on the future protection of the union, opening space for criticism of the SNP’s domestic record in their devolved administration. In winning a UK landslide, the Conservatives are therefore accountable to deliver on a campaign centred on preventing a further referendum and protecting the union. In partial contrast, the SNP’s victory in Scotland alone provides them with them a rhetorical mandate rather than instrumental strength in averting an EU exit, which can only be delivered by a return of focus to independence. It was, and promises to be, all about the constitution.

Gender takes to the shade in Scotland

Mirroring the contest throughout the UK, the campaign in Scotland was a decidedly flat affair in terms of women's participation, sitting in stark contrast to the invigorating civic and grassroots activism which accompanied the Scottish independence referendum and the 2015 and 2017 General Elections. As commentator Kirsty Strickland suggested, this time there was a "focus on bros ... an election of the men, by the men". Even the record number of 220 women elected as MPs across the UK – up from 208 in 2017 – didn't gather the celebration it may have warranted, representing just 34% of MPs overall. In Scotland, the figures were down. With only 18 female MPs elected, it decreased their ratio from 34% in 2017 to 31%. Engender, Scotland's feminist organisation, argued that there were hardly any proposals from any party focusing on a vision of the future for women in this year's so-called "Brexit election". This was particularly concerning, it said, "given that EU-membership has been instrumental in progressing women's equality in the UK, driving the expansion of gender mainstreaming into UK and Scottish policy". Indeed, the feeling was that gender was very much off the agenda in Scotland as the dividing lines were split across the intersection of Brexit and independence.

That was, of course, until the latter period of the campaign when it became a tale of two women, albeit in different governmental realms. From "the most dangerous woman in Britain" to "the bravest woman in politics" (according to Willie Rennie), the election experiences of Nicola Sturgeon and Jo Swinson couldn't be more different. Though not standing as a candidate, Sturgeon was at the forefront of electoral coverage, while Swinson faced scrutiny in her short-lived role as Liberal Democrat leader. Ultimately losing her East Dunbartonshire seat to the SNP's Amy Callaghan, discussions focused on her race to the bottom. While many argued her stance on unequivocally revoking article 50 was her downfall, anecdotally, some East Dunbartonshire constituents felt neglected as she focussed much of her campaign on England. Unavoidable though, was the role everyday sexism had to play in her representation. Though Swinson's "girly swot" t-shirt worn during a photocall was a take on Boris Johnson's slur on David Cameron, it acted as unfortunate echoing of some of the pejorative framing of her as "shrill" and a "head girl", hearkening towards the stereotypes attached to young women who over-step their mark in the masculine realm of political leadership. This played out in the infantilising coverage following the election, with Bill Leckie of the *Scottish Sun* saying that "poor wee Jo" had "flown too close to the sun". If that wasn't enough, the author claimed, with the "feather duster [she brought to the] knife-fight" she could now use it to keep her house tidy, due to her unemployment.

Scotland has previously attracted praise for the progressive 'female face' of leadership in recent years, however this has also drastically shifted in this election. Ruth Davidson, leader of the Scottish Conservatives, stepped down months prior, following Kezia Dugdale's departure as Scottish Labour leader two years ago. Davidson's interim replacement of Jackson Carlaw meant there was only one woman, Nicola Sturgeon, in the leadership line-up of the four main parties. Her resignation, Davidson said, came in part over her conflict about Brexit, but also because of the recent birth of her son, fuelling a revival of longstanding patriarchal discourses about the incompatibility of politics and motherhood. Sturgeon, therefore, was the only female leader in the STV and BBC Scotland Leaders' Debates, alongside Carlaw, Scottish Labour's Richard Leonard and Willie Rennie, leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Scholarship suggests that women in leadership positions can generate relatively high media capital due to often embodying the news value of "unexpectedness". Female leaders can therefore give an impression of parity in both institutional and mediated representation when the overall figures reveal otherwise. Arguably, Sturgeon's high profile means there may be a sense of better female representation in Scotland than there really is: a gendered implication of the UK's increasingly presidential-style politics over recent election cycles.

Figures show that the gap is narrowing between the UK and Scottish Parliaments, with the current 34% in Westminster challenging the 36% in Holyrood. As Kenny, MacKay and Murtagh have pointed out, when gender parity is taken off the agenda, the progress to equality of representation often does stagnate. As has been the perennial argument of feminist researchers across Scotland, the proportion of elected female MSPs has never surpassed the high point of women's representation in the Scottish Parliament at 39.5% in 2003. It remains to be seen whether Scotland will continue its upwards trajectory in its own 2021 election – with the UK nipping at its heels – or stay around the same figure. Whatever the numbers show, though, we still have a long way to go.



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Northern Ireland: a route back to Stormont?



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Northern Ireland's election contained plenty of drama, with four of the 18 seats changing hands but the impact of the Conservatives' substantial majority will be to marginalise its MPs. The DUP had a tough defence to mount, having won ten seats in 2017. Amid a 6% fall in vote share, which dropped in all but one constituency, the party was reduced to 8 MPs and came close to losing all 3 of the seats it held in Belfast. Sinn Féin's return of 7 MPs matched its 2017 tally and the party took a notable scalp in capturing the North Belfast seat of the DUP's Westminster leader, Nigel Dodds. However, Sinn Féin's vote share fell overall by 7% and was down everywhere except North Belfast. The nationalist SDLP regained the Westminster representation it lost in 2017, its leader Colum Eastwood thrashing Sinn Féin to retake Foyle, one of two SDLP gains.

The most striking feature of the results was the rise of the centrist Alliance Party, which repudiates unionism and nationalism. Whilst only capturing one Westminster seat, the party's vote share soared by nearly 9%, to add to the 11% European election increase and 5% in council elections in 2019. Alliance increased its vote share in every constituency bar one. With successive surveys of public opinion showing that those rejecting unionist or nationalist labels outnumber those who do identify as such, Alliance has a large and growing electoral reservoir in which to fish.

Given its potentially profound implications for Northern Ireland, Brexit dominated the election, although older Orange versus Green sectarian issues were never far away, even amid the rise of centrist voters. The key outcomes were the marginalisation of the region's representatives and the increased hopes of a revival of the devolved power sharing which collapsed almost three years earlier.

Electoral pacts: Brexit-based or sectarian?

The DUP's confidence-and-supply deal with the Conservative government from 2017 to 2019 was successful in attracting a large amount of extra funding. However, the DUP was then cast aside by Prime Minister Johnson, who reached a Brexit deal which aligned Northern Ireland much more closely to the EU than the rest of the UK. Johnson had promised the DUP the exact opposite at their party conference one year earlier.

Much derision was aimed at the DUP for its failed Brexit strategy and the 2019 election was marked by 'Remain pacts', as the SDLP stood aside for Sinn Féin in North Belfast and Sinn Féin reciprocated in South Belfast. The arrangement allowed Sinn Féin to unseat the DUP's Dodds, whilst the SDLP gained South Belfast from the DUP, although such was Claire Hanna's winning margin that it is doubtful a pact was needed.

The DUP complained these so-called Remain

pacts were merely 'pan-nationalists' fronts, a charge containing some truth but the DUP was equally content to see pan-unionist fronts on its side. The UUP stood aside to try and help the DUP in North Belfast and the DUP did likewise for the UUP in a similarly unsuccessful pact in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Unionism versus nationalism overlay the Remain versus Leave battles, not least because the Unionist parties were even more opposed to Boris Johnson's form of Brexit than those parties which had always supported Remain.

Marginalisation at Westminster – so a return to a devolved Assembly?

Given the size of the Conservative majority, there was little prospect of Northern Ireland's MPs being able to achieve much at Westminster. With the DUP's once-pivotal role gone, the possibility of a return of devolution loomed large. Whilst Sinn Féin's moderate election performance also raised the issue of whether its policy of abstention from Westminster should be revisited, all Northern Irish MPs, participatory or abstentionist, would struggle for influence in London. Even if it could be proved beyond doubt that abstention was harming Sinn Féin's electoral fortunes, the party leadership would be wary of touching the issue. A two-thirds majority of members would be needed for change and risks a split.

The underwhelming performance of the DUP and Sinn Féin may have indicated that the electorate was tiring of their failure to restore devolved power-sharing and the Northern Ireland Assembly is the focus of renewed attention. If locally elected politicians want power, they will need to restore Stormont. The DUP might take the view that conceding Sinn Féin's demands for an Irish Language Act is the bitter pill that needs swallowing to avoid the grim vista of power being confined to local councils for at least half a generation. If agreement cannot be found, another set of elections is probable. If there is still no agreement, direct rule may be reintroduced, but this now seems improbable.

‘Remain alliance’ win the BBC Northern Ireland Leaders’ debate (online at least)

In June 2017, Northern Ireland Twitter’s interest in the BBCNI leaders’ debate peaked when DUP representative Jeffrey Donaldson held up a photograph of Sinn Féin’s Máirtín Ó Muilleoir meeting Ulster Defence Association leader Jackie McDonald. Clearly intended to deflect criticism that DUP candidates had been endorsed by loyalist paramilitaries, the incident garnered more attention from tweeters than the more pressing issues of Brexit and the collapse of the Stormont Executive in January 2017. There was much ridicule of Donaldson’s behaviour, in marked contrast to the praise for the SDLP’s Colum Eastwood and Alliance’s Naomi Long. Nevertheless, illustrating the limitations of using social media as a direct proxy for public opinion, the DUP went on to consolidate its position as the largest party in the region in the 2017 Westminster Election.

Fast-forward to December 2019, there appears little prospect of an agreement being reached to bring back the Assembly. Fears about the damage that a hard Brexit might inflict upon the region spurred parties such as the Greens, SDLP and Sinn Féin to create their own ‘Remain Alliance’, standing aside for each other in constituencies such as North Belfast and South Belfast in order to maximise the number of pro-Remain MPs. All were critical of the DUP’s confidence and supply agreement with the outgoing Conservative government, as well as their support for Brexit. I set out to examine whether these issues were given greater prominence during the 2019 debate held on 10 December, which saw Eastwood, Long and Donaldson (again deputising for Arlene Foster) joined by Sinn Féin’s Michelle Foster and the recently appointed Ulster Unionist leader Steve Aiken. TAGS was used to collect 1875 tweets posted between 9-11 December tagged #bbcni-debate. As per the 2017 debate, the vast majority were retweets (70.13 percent) with only 42 @replies between tweeters (2.24 percent). However, this time Northern Ireland Twitter appeared to focus more on how each representative addressed the key issues of Brexit and the need to get the power-sharing institutions up and running again.

A preliminary analysis of the top 10 most retweeted posts (shared 410 times) revealed that all of them focussed on Brexit with many blaming the DUP for the crisis. Three of these were posted from O’Neill’s personal Twitter account, containing short video soundbites from her contributions to the debate reiterating her party’s desire to restore the Executive and for Irish unity. For example, the most retweeted tweet in the corpus (shared 70 times) saw her chide Donaldson that Westminster had never served Ireland’s interests and encourage voters to “reject the toxic politics of Brexit... embrace the politics of hope, progress and unity”. However, O’Neill was not immune from criticism

on the hashtag, as demonstrated by a tweet from Irish News journalist Suzanne Breen noting that she had become “embarrassingly unstuck” arguing that Sinn Féin’s abstentionism from Westminster had made no difference on Brexit. The party was also attacked by the SDLP for “claiming £5.5 million pounds in expenses over 9 years” while maintaining this policy, with a video of MLA John O’Dowd shared to illustrate their opposition to Northern Ireland receiving special status in any Brexit agreement. Elsewhere, the Alliance Party were responsible for three of the most shared tweets; these included Long’s criticism of the crises in the NHS and schools and blaming the DUP for the potential border in the Irish Sea caused by Brexit. Overall, there was a conspicuous absence of support for the DUP amongst the tweets most heavily retweeted during the debate.

There are of course a number of health warnings that come with these preliminary findings. First and foremost, popularity on social media does not automatically translate into votes. Northern Ireland Twitter constitutes a small but highly engaged segment of the total population rather than its mirror image. Second, the use of party accounts to share edited clips of the leaders’ debate illustrates the increasing sophistication of their digital campaigns. There is already some evidence that parties such as Sinn Féin are mobilising supporters on sites such as Twitter to drown out critical voices and promote campaign messages. Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that many of those sharing those ‘dual screening’ the debate were already members or supporters of these parties, not undecided voters. While this might have been the most ‘digital’ election campaign in the region to date, issues such as Brexit and the NHS crisis were more likely to have influenced the voting behaviour of Northern Irish citizens during the 2019 Westminster Election.

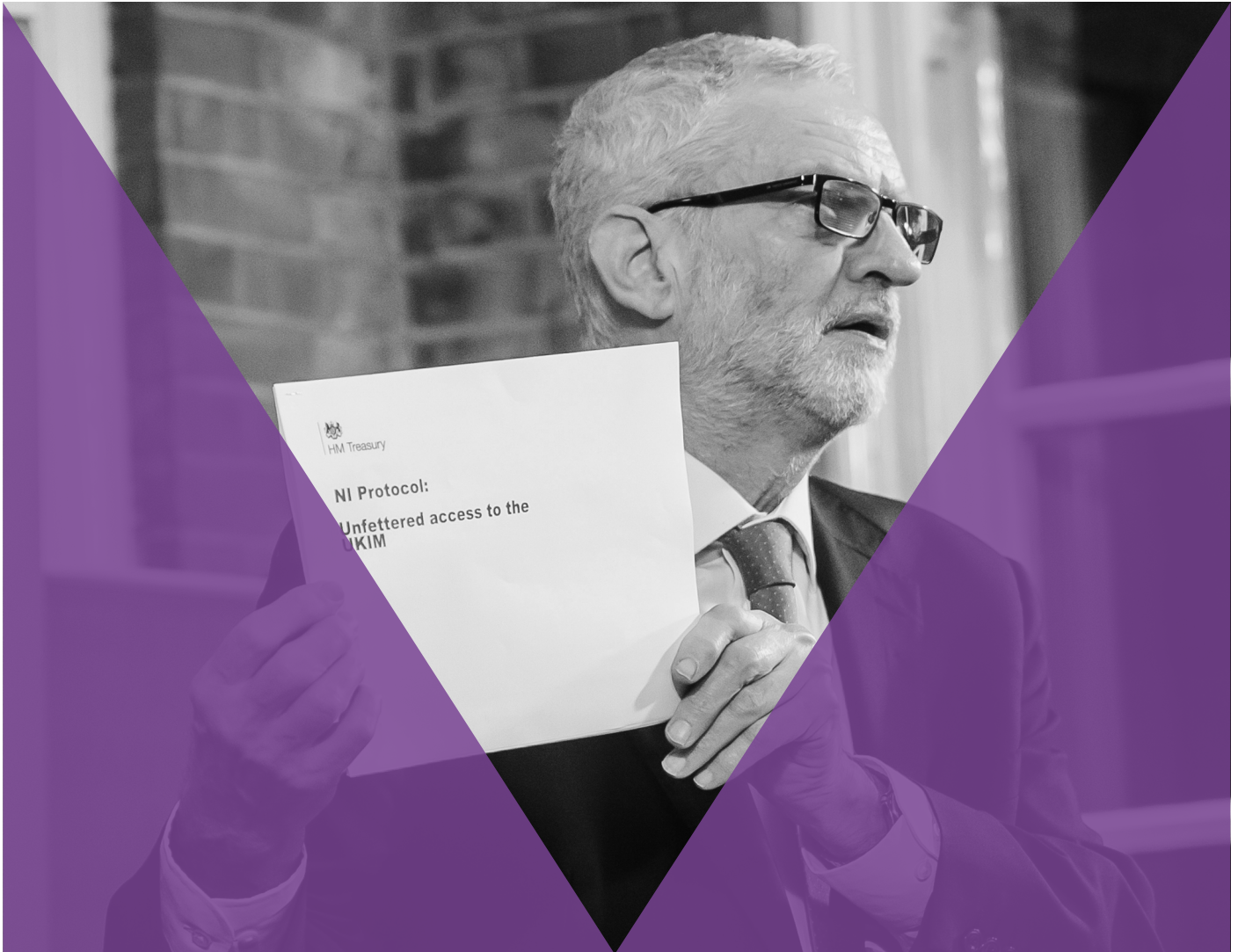


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Parties and the campaign

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something EU

After nearly four years of Parliamentary deadlock and social polarisation where the other is not just wrong, but evil, the British have finally made up their mind. We're going.

Like 2017 and the 2019 European elections, this was another Brexit election. There were other major issues – lack of trust, Britain's decay, the climate, politicians' incompetence – but Brexit was a key, if not the key, issue. This was reflected in leaders' priorities. Boris Johnson's simplistic but catchy mantra of “get Brexit done”, Nigel Farage pushing for immediate exit on WTO rules, Jo Swinson's aim of scrapping Brexit entirely, Nicola Sturgeon awkwardly balancing Scotland's membership of two Unions. Love them or loathe them, all of the leaders had clear Brexit positions. Except Jeremy Corbyn. After four years of vagueness, promising to magically negotiate a perfect new deal then hold another referendum whose side he couldn't choose, and plagued by domestic issues, Corbyn's lack of clarity on the biggest peacetime political crisis the British have faced since the possibility of revolution in 1832, led his party to its worst defeat since 1935.

Brexit is nearly over. At least the British civil war – the Brexit trade negotiations will dog the UK and EU for years to come. As another Brexit-dominated election and a confirmatory referendum in all but name, what the 2019 election demonstrated is how “Europe” has many different meanings in British consciousness. Jacques Delors memorably defined Europe as an ‘unidentified political object’. Now, for the British, this malleability has multiplied.

“Europe” is something old. The Liberal Democrats sought to maintain the status quo of 1973, and cancel Brexit. This backfired as it clearly did not appeal, even to the millions of Remainers the LibDems wanted to rally. Jo Swinson losing her own seat reflects concerns about how liberal or democratic the Liberal Democrats' proposal was. In the coming years this remembrance of the EU will grow, with “Europe” in Rejoinder imaginations meaning specifically – and only – the EU.

“Europe” is something new. The Brexit Party planned to immediately exit the EU and enter the unknown on WTO rules. This would have been a novel, and very risky, leap in the dark. But like the Liberal Democrats, the Brexit Party completely failed. Neither Remain nor Hard Leave appealed to the British public. For backers of a Hard Brexit, “Europe” has morphed into a new enemy, an eternal foe which must be kept at arm's length for years to come.

“Europe” is something borrowed. The Conservatives' “Oven-Ready Brexit” is not an a la carte option but a dried-out, reheated version of Theresa May's deal, a borrowed option but one which the public chose for want of anything better. For the winners of 2019, “Europe” is an inherited imagination which has barely changed since

1973 – something to work with, but something the British do not wish to really be part of.

“Europe” is something. Labour's refusal or inability to take a side meant that their position was vague, implausible, and frustrating to both sides. In a country where Remainers and Leavers were united only by how sick of Brexit they were, an empty promise of magical deals, more delay, and somehow achieving in three months what May spent three years struggling with, was crushed. In the years to come Labour, whose current leadership have long hated the EU, will have to decide what relationship it wants with Europe. Whatever “Europe” means to an unstable alliance of very pro-EU Blairites and very anti-EU Marxists.

With a huge Conservative majority, Britain will now exit the EU. But the future relationship with the EU is yet to be built, and imaginations of “Europe” will continue to evolve in British discourse. Some Remainers will become Rejoiners. The radical left will resurrect its old 2016 slogan of “Love Europe, Hate the EU”. British culture will remember membership of, or withdrawal from, Europe, with nostalgia and regret, celebration and vindication. Ethnic transnationalists will promote “Europe” as a civilisation under threat, including from the EU. And new Europes will come. IN the four years dominated by Brexit we have seen multiple imaginations of “Europe” emerge, so it is reasonable to predict that even more imaginations of “Europe” will emerge in 2020 and beyond, which we can't yet conceive but which will have a significant role in shaping campaigns to rejoin, or refuse, the EU twenty or thirty years from now. Yet even if the EU still exists by then, it will be a very different EU. Perhaps the most profound consequence of the 2019 UK election is that Britain's withdrawal will be a defining aspect of what helps to strengthen, or terminally weaken, an EU which cannot delay change any more than the UK.



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'Weak and wobbly' to 'get Brexit done': 2019 and Conservative campaigns



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The scale of the largely unexpected 2019 Conservative 'landslide', begs the question: what did the Conservatives do in 2019 that they did not do during the 2017 General Election? This short analysis aims to address this by comparing aspects of the Conservative Party's campaign approaches in the 2019 with earlier general elections. My analysis of the 2017 Conservative campaign is used as the basis for comparing key campaign factors, including leadership; slogans and branding; strategy; and digital campaigning.

Leadership: In 2019, Johnson exhibited brutally uncompromising leadership in standing firm on removing the Conservative whip from several Tory grandees who had rebelled against the government over Brexit. This demonstration of unflinching power established a standard for party discipline that ultimately fed into a display of party unity in the Conservatives' 2019 campaign.

Theresa May, who was largely untested in highly visible national campaigns, began the 2017 election campaign being portrayed as a similarly strong presidential figure. However, mid-campaign, following a number of significant campaign blunders and policy u-turns, the party strategy shifted away from a focus on May as leader to emphasising the strengths of the Conservative Party more generally.

This shift away from the presidential model of campaigning was less observable in 2019. Boris Johnson, while not being completely immune from occasional campaign setbacks (e.g. criticism over the state of the NHS and his response to the London Bridge attack) remained unequivocally front and centre in the Tories' national campaign. Brand 'Boris' became the central presidential focus, akin to the party's strategies that centred on brand Cameron in 2010 and 2015.

Slogans and branding: The focus on Theresa May's leadership early in the 2017 campaign was largely aimed at branding her as a second 'Iron Lady', a Thatcher-like, figure, through incessantly repeating the slogan 'Strong and Stable Leadership'. However, public discourse soon flipped the slogan on its head to frame May's seemingly shaky campaign as 'weak and wobbly'.

In contrast, the Conservatives' 'get Brexit done' slogan of 2019, in the context of the largely single issue 'Brexit election', is, quite possibly, the smartest campaign move the Conservatives have ever taken. Like Donald Trump's 2016 'Make America Great Again', the phrase resonated significantly with frustrated voters in the Brexit context and soon became a common lexicon frequently appearing in media, political and public discourses. The Conservatives integrated the slogan with the gimmicky 'memeification' of political broadcasts, including a 'Love Actually' parody, starring Johnson as the

Hugh Grant character; and a TV stunt using a 'get Brexit done' JCB.

Strategy: In 2017, Theresa May took a narrow inner-circle approach to using close advisers for the development and implementation of the Conservative campaign strategy. However, May's choices came under significant internal criticism and the strategy was judged to be out of touch with the electorate.

The Conservatives' 2019 strategy has been widely attributed to Vote Leave's former campaign director Dominic Cummings and Isaac Levido, a digital strategist connected with the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's campaigns.

The Conservatives' digital strategy was reported on Channel 4 News, 4 December 2019, and in the Sunday Telegraph, 15 December 2019, to have used negative scare campaign techniques, in the form of Facebook and Instagram attack-ads targeted at specific groups of voters in target seats and pro-Leave areas. The ads are reported to have warned of the supposed impact of Labour's policies on the cost of living and potential tax hikes. The Tories are also reported to have invested tens of thousands of pounds in targeted online videos, especially in the latter stages of the campaign. This investment in an integrated, coordinated and targeted online strategy seems to have taken a significantly more sophisticated approach when compared to 2017.

Digital campaigning: Ridge-Newman (2014) suggests that Johnson's 2008 Mayoral campaign was one of the early examples of Facebook innovation; and digital campaigning grew significantly and organically at the grassroots of the Conservative Party during the leadership of David Cameron. However, under Theresa May, the party struggled to compete with the extent of Momentum's collective digital engagement, which gave energy to Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 Labour Party campaign.

Where digital innovation took a nosedive under May, early in the long-campaign Johnson reignited the Tories' approach to digital politics in circumventing classic media by using Facebook to announce government policy. The Conservatives also successfully integrated their digital strategy with offline activities and competed more equally with Momentum on Twitter. The Tory Twitter strategy was bold and aggressive, but, at times, highly criticised, especially when a CCHQ Twitter handle was amended to appear as a fact-checking service.

As per 2017, Labour demonstrated significant online mobilisation through extensive and coordinated grassroots activity on Twitter. It led many journalists and commentators to mistakenly link Twitter trends to the wider public mood, which could be one of the key factors contributing to the collective surprise at the extent of the Conservatives' 2019 election win.

Conservative victories in Labour heartlands in the 2019 General Election

This short article offers some initial thoughts on the impact of the Conservative election campaign in terms of the party's performance in traditional Labour strongholds in the 2019 General Election.

There are a significant number of constituencies where Labour have been the dominant political party for many, many years. Media commentary have claimed that these constituencies represent a so called 'red wall' spreading from Wales, through the Midlands, and up into the North of England. However some of these constituencies were heavily Leave supporting areas in the EU referendum, and this presented a clear problem for the Labour Party who were trying to keep balanced between a pro-remain party membership, set against many Labour loyal voters who chose to leave in the EU referendum. Many loyal Labour voters in Brexit supporting areas have become disillusioned by what they perceive as Labour not fulfilling their wishes to leave the EU, and see Labour in the last parliamentary session as preventing the Conservative Government and country from leaving the EU. It is sometimes argued that Labour which claims to represent the needs of the working class, are disregarding the views of working class Brexit supporting Labour voters, despite them voting for the Labour Party often over many generations. They are in other words, Labour strongholds, but have these Labour strongholds been taken for granted?

It seemed logical that strong Brexit voting areas would switch their vote in protest at the lack of Brexit being implemented in a timely manner. Yet this means a significant psychological challenge to many loyal Labour voters. It may have seemed logical, at first glance, to switch voting allegiances to the Conservatives who are promising an imminent UK exit from the EU if they could get a majority in the 2019 election. Put simply, give Boris Johnson and the Conservatives 'the keys to Downing Street' with a workable majority and they will deliver Brexit as promised. Yet for many of these so called 'old Labour' communities voting Conservative has remained a significant act, as they are communities which rely on public services, often have below median incomes, and have strong memories about how communities have been damaged by what they perceive as Conservative policy and inaction which led to deindustrialisation and resultant loss of jobs, especially in the manufacturing and mining industries.

So, what is the outcome of the 2019 election in terms of Conservative gains from Labour strongholds? Put simply there is a Conservative majority of 80 seats, of which Conservative gains from Labour have contributed substantially. What is surprising is that the Conservatives have won seats, where it was often unlikely to be thought possible based on previous electoral performance. For example, seats in the Black Country area of

the West Midlands, through to the pottery areas of Stoke on Trent, up to former mining communities in Bolsover, and areas of the north east such as Blyth Valley, Sedgefield, and even Wrexham in Wales have all seen historic election results in 2019, with so called 'Labour heartland' seats being won by the Conservatives. Gains of such constituencies represent a true landmark in British politics with Boris Johnson's message of 'get Brexit done' resonating with proportions of voters in such constituencies, set against a rejection of Jeremy Corbyn as potential Prime Minister, and the big state left-wing ideology posited by Labour.

Whilst it can be seen that the Conservatives have made significant gains, the immediate challenge is now for the Conservatives to satisfy these voters. Key to this is delivering on Brexit, managing electoral expectations in potentially complicated negotiations on the future relationship with the UK and the EU, and meeting the needs of these constituencies by regeneration and job creation strategies. It remains a significant challenge for the Conservatives to retain traditional Labour constituencies in the next general election, but if they were to do so, this suggests a major shift in the political terrain of the UK.



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Corbyn and Johnson's strategic narratives on the campaign trail



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Our analysis focuses on the ways in which Corbyn and Johnson's campaigns aided the formation of strategic narratives about the UK's role in international politics. With the 2019 election called to overcome a political deadlock over the process of de-Europeanisation, the UK's international standing requires new narratives. This analysis is guided by two questions: What are the key news media campaign themes aiding the formation of strategic narratives by Corbyn and Johnson? What, if at all, do those themes reveal about the UK's standing in international politics after elections?

During the 2019 election cycle, Jeremy Corbyn faced a significant level of opposition from both historically hostile and sympathetic media alike. With regards to international politics, the framing of Corbyn in the media thus centred on questions about his suitability for leadership. Reporting of Corbyn in relation to foreign policy demonstrates this well – instead of praising or criticising Labour's foreign policy, coverage focused on Corbyn as a threat to national security. One example of this is Corbyn's argument for further NATO's engagement with Russia depicting the Labour leader as a “puppet from Moscow”, whose limited reaction to comparisons with Stalin was telling.

Corbyn neither promoted nor had a chance to promote a particular strategic narrative, as the Labour Party's focus on domestic policies during the campaign meant that he downplayed the articulation of a compelling vision for Britain's geopolitical future. The key media theme we identify concerning Corbyn was consequently his lack of a strategic narrative, which was only furthered by the media deeming him as an unsuitable leader to represent Britain on the world stage. Corbyn's strategy of transforming the UK into a social-democratic, European state via ‘radical’ domestic policies thus failed to convince electorate who chose to be something other than ‘European’.

Owing to Boris Johnson's near refusal to divulge the UK's post-Brexit path beyond ‘get Brexit done’, media coverage of his election campaign attempted to de-code the meaning of ‘Global Britain’. As the NATO summit was held in Watford, reflection on the UK's standing in the alliance became a prominent media theme during the campaign. Media favourable towards Johnson positioned the UK as a ‘particularly influential’ member of the Alliance due to its commitment to defence spending targets, which most European members ‘fail to meet’. As such, the UK was presented as ‘influential’ owing its status of a ‘vital hinge’ between the US and European allies. In the spirit of punching above its weight, the special relationship with the US was used to exemplify UK's global reach. Yet, the Johnson's campaign failed to address the question of the UK's position beyond NATO. These linchpins suggest an Anglo-American narrative based on its ties with

NATO and the US, whilst remaining committed to ‘global security’, as a pillar aiding the preservation of the UK's standing.

As well as Johnson's declarations regarding NATO, his commitment to the alliance was reinforced by his stance towards Russia. Yet, his delay to publish the Russian interference report was essentially under-reported by Johnson-favouring media. Critical media reports speculated and challenged this narrative suppression, indicating the Conservatives' willingness to accept oligarchical funding. On the one hand, the campaign coverage reveals Johnson's ‘tough talk’ on Russia as a form of personalised posturing, whilst, on the other hand, inadvertently showing that the UK is open for business with a diverse range of political regimes, which subscribe to diverse forms of political governance.

A lack of detail on the ‘oven-ready’ Brexit deal is a telling aspect of the 2019 campaign coverage. Positive coverage framed the UK as having the luxury of choice when it comes to post-Brexit trade deals with there even being the possibility of ‘playing the EU off against the US’ as though there is a bidding contest to win a free trade deal with the UK. Moderate optimism for the UK remaining desirable and influential perseveres, and the election result may serve to indulge this notion further.

Unquestionably, party leaders have the ability to form strategic narratives about one's own states in international politics. With the 2019 election result likely to accelerate the de-Europeanisation of the UK, both party leaders showed different abilities, constraints and approaches to the articulation of their vision of the UK in international politics during the election campaign. Whilst the media campaign discourses shifted the positioning of the UK in international politics, largely by using sloganeering and fragmented statements on the conduct of foreign policy, the political realities after Brexit will likely speed up the soul-searching for Britain's new strategic narratives. In the first instance, the 2019 election result demonstrates that the exploration for strategic narrative will have to begin with the reassessment of the UK's credibility as an actor in international relations.

More Blimp, less Gandhi: the Corbyn problem

On the doorsteps Labour activists claim their manifesto promises were popular, the problem was Jeremy Corbyn. What led many working class voters to vote Conservative or Brexit, abandoning their traditional voting pattern? The data in this article draws on the comments of some ordinary working class Britons when talking about their voting choices on social media.

Brexit

Brexit was an issue. Not just that Corbyn proposed a second referendum but that he did not articulate why. Labour failed to clearly set out the terms of the agreement they wished to negotiate with the EU. Instead they tried to sideline the issue and focus on social policy. While this played to their strength it left a weakness as many in the country want the Brexit issue resolved and off the agenda. The simplicity of Johnson's 'get Brexit done' cut through, Corbyn's vague message and promise to be the honest broker did not.

The two Corbyns

Corbyn's social agenda was very complex, full of huge promises that inevitably would be high cost. At its heart was a very different plan for the nation, proudly socialist, reforming capitalism to benefit the many. For those living in areas with high poverty and job insecurity - many of the Labour heartlands - this should have been exactly the sort of change they wanted. But many rejected that platform.

Or did they? Many working class voters went to social media saying they could never vote for 'a traitor', a 'threat to national security' or 'the most dangerous man in Britain'. His attempts to broker peace in Northern Ireland and represent underdogs in various parts of the Middle East saw him engage with a range of individuals; associations which the Conservative party and their supportive newspapers used to paint him as a traitor and terrorist sympathizer. Corbyn failed to make his own side of this story accessible and fudged many attempts to redress these weaknesses.

Corbyn's consistent questioning of UK foreign policy allowed an image to be promulgated of him as opposing the national interest. This included his open anti-nationalism, open opposition to most instances of military intervention, and the proposing talks, however unlikely that option. His regret at the killing of Osama bin Laden, as opposed to his arrest and trial, was used to portray him as weak. The working class voters reference many of these principled stances Corbyn adopted as signs of his inability to lead Britain. Britain, to those voters, is a strong and decisive nation. It attacks enemies, it is the country that 'won' the Second World War, 'Britannia rules the waves', this jingoism which is embedded in British culture, jars with Corbyn's pacifist political character.

Hence the social agenda was balanced against the notion of a Corbyn premiership. The greater danger was deemed that he would welcome Britain's enemies into the country, weaken the nation on the world stage, and so undermine the image of the nation many hold dear. The dangers of trade deals that sold off the NHS to Trump became a lesser fear for many of these voters.

Images of nation and the future for Britain

Perhaps Corbyn's lack of nationalism was also perceived as problematic for him renegotiating Brexit. Would he give up too much control to the EU, painted in these working class areas as having a negative impact on the nation, given his propensity to support the enemies of the country? And we should not underestimate the perception among many working class voters that the EU is an enemy power.

So should a new Labour leader revitalise Corbyn's social policy or move back to a more Blairite centrist stance? In the modern era nationalism is a powerful force in our politics. It seems these working class voters want on the one hand policies that directly benefit them, alleviating poverty and redressing inequality, while also happily bombing enemies of the nation into oblivion; however unrealistic the latter is. They want their leader to celebrate all that they think of as Britishness. They are also socially conservative, opposing a multicultural, liberal and inclusive society.

This represents a challenge to the values of Corbyn's Labour as well as the largely young support base he has built. The younger voters are more liberal, progressive and have less interest in a nationalism they see as petty and outdated. Reconciling these different tendencies is going to be a major challenge for Labour as they attempt to return to a position where they are able to think once more about forming a government. A majority in Britain does not want a Gandhi-like leader, the preference is for a flag-waving Colonel Blimp character, their grip on detail and the truth is immaterial, doing whatever it takes to win and showing pride in their nation is the trump card.



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The media and the manifestos: why 2019 wasn't 2017 redux for the Labour party



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Prior to the 2017 General Election, party manifestos were seen as relatively insignificant in influencing voting behaviour. However, this changed in 2017 when the Labour and Conservative manifestos played an important role in the Tory party losing its majority. Labour's bold manifesto, with its pledges to nationalise the railways and energy companies, raise the minimum wage and end tuition fees caught the public imagination, whilst the Conservative's uncosted offering, with its unpopular 'dementia tax', damaged the party's campaign.

But in the 2019 election, Labour was not able to repeat the trick with its even more radical manifesto. Meanwhile, the Conservatives' 'small target' approach meant that their manifesto did not impact the significant poll lead the party brought into the election.

Why was Labour's 2019 manifesto unable to resurrect the party's fortunes as it had in 2017 - especially since polling indicated key policies were individually popular? To answer that question, five key factors were important.

First, negative perceptions of the party leadership influenced how people viewed its policy offerings. Policies may be popular, but if the public don't like or trust the party to deliver them, then they won't be seen as credible. In 2017 Jeremy Corbyn was more of an unknown quantity, fought a good campaign and saw his approval ratings rise substantially. But he came into the 2019 election with record low approval ratings and although these improved during the campaign, they remained well below his 2017 levels. Reports from canvassers suggests that sustained negative mass media coverage and 'dark advertising' from front groups were crucial, with voters citing key media attack lines - such as support for terrorists, antisemitism and that he would bankrupt the country- in explaining why they disliked the Labour leader.

Second, the manifesto was negatively reported in the press and broadcast media. The right-wing press provided false and misleading accounts of how much the manifesto would cost. Broadcasting relied heavily on the IFS who argued that the manifesto costings were 'not credible'. Despite many economists supporting Labour's approach - these views weren't featured in the BBC's mass audience bulletins. Instead those television bulletins - and radio shows like 'PM' - only cited as an external source the IFS, whose negative framing of the manifesto predominated and was later weaponized in Conservative attacks ads.

Third, the manifesto was too big and insufficient time and effort had been put into preparing the public for its more radical elements. Rather than a tight, focused offering with a few eye catching and popular proposals, the manifesto contained a cornucopia of retail offers which - in combination - voters found implausible.

Furthermore, the ideological ground hadn't been prepared to allow the more radical elements - like major public investment in a Green New Deal or free broadband - to resonate with voters. Such policies needed to be grounded in a narrative stressing the key role of an interventionist state and the importance of universalism - both approaches that marked a fundamental break with previous Conservative and New Labour governments. You cannot prepare the public for such a fundamental shift in a few short weeks. It requires a sustained programme of public education over many years. The creation of a mass membership party in 2015 offered Labour an opportunity to mobilise its supporters to explain the need for such policies, in face to face conversations and the more open spaces in broadcast media. It was an opportunity that was not taken.

Fourth, Labour faced the problem that over the preceding decades much of the public had lost faith in the ability of politicians and the state to institute major social change that would improve their lives. Canvassers reported a deep sense of 'nihilism' and 'resentment' - 'Policy doesn't matter here. They've forgotten what government can do'. Furthermore, as Ramsay notes, the Conservative campaign with its 'key meme' that 'you can't trust any of them' was intended to breed cynicism about potential change and 'drive down turnout among those who would benefit most from progressive policies'. This is not an environment where a manifesto offering radical social change could easily take root.

Finally, the credibility of the manifesto was damaged by the inability of Labour politicians to explain how it would be paid for. When this question was put to Nia Griffiths on an episode of Any Questions (22 November) she was unable to provide a clear answer. Even more damaging was Jeremy Corbyn's evasiveness when Andrew Neil asked how the major pledge to the WASPI women would be funded. Labour always faces a hostile media much of it deeply opposed to a larger state. In such an environment, it has to be able to defend its spending commitments in a convincing manner.

Down a slippery rope... is Britain joining the global trends towards right-wing populism?

Reflecting on the election results, I was reminded of a conversation I had with a delegate at a marketing conference after I presented my work on the discourse of the Vlaams Belang, an extreme right wing party from Belgium, titled Marketing 'ethically questionable' politics: the case of a xenophobic political party. To my dismay, he was boasting about the lack of such a party in the UK, which he extrapolated as being evidence for a lack of demand for xenophobic right-wing populist parties. Admittedly, the BNP and NF were a marginal presence in the British political landscape and this conversation took place before the breakthrough of UKIP. Beyond the blind naivety of the statement, what astonished me was his self-congratulatory assurance that the country was somewhat immune to the appeal of prejudice and bigoted rhetoric. This discussion took place almost 10 years ago. Haven't we come a long way since?

Extra-parliamentary organisations such as the EDL, Britain First, and the anti-Muslim Pegida UK have since emerged, and their theses been granted undue visibility in the media. Unfortunately, some tropes popular with the aforementioned far-right and Islamophobic groups have been steadily seeping through to the mainstream media and political discourse. The 2019 General Election campaign is unfortunately no exception, as it has seen a number of negative narratives focusing on immigrants and ethnic/religious minorities in the UK. Accusations of antisemitism within the Labour party have resurfaced with a vengeance, with a significant number of Jewish voters stating that it would be a deciding factor for their vote. Further, the lack of willingness to engage with endemic Islamophobia within its rank, has tarnished the Conservative brand and significantly reduced its potential appeal to British Muslim voters. In response, various organisations have mobilised against Tory candidates, such as the 'Operation Muslim Vote' asking donors to "help [...] unseat 14 Islamophobic MPs/Ministers & Boris Johnson" and stating, "[w]e have unseated 8 Islamophobic MPs in 3 general elections. Help us unseat 14 more in this one".

MEND (Muslim Engagement & Development), a British NGO, has encouraged Muslims to participate in general elections. Providing a list of all the incidents of Islamophobia within the Conservative Party, MEND published a scorecard of various parties' policies against issues of relevance for Muslim citizens, such as Racial and Religious Equality, Minority rights. The Muslim Council of Britain, a non-partisan organisation also encouraged Muslims to strategically vote. They produced a detailed report of the main expectations of the Muslim community, highlighting how 'British Muslim votes matter', and included a whole section on Islamophobia and hate crime. The report states the organisation's "serious concerns

of the resurgence of the far-right together with growing islamophobia from the governing party to sections of the media, which have shaped social attitudes about Muslims". Relatedly, MCB have repeatedly demanded an investigation in Islamophobia in the Conservative Party and have directly called out Boris Johnson for his "blind spot for this type of racism".

Whether one agrees or not with the qualifications of the Conservative Party, it is certainly unsettling to see the leader of the country's current ruling party and some of its members seamlessly embrace right-wing populist rhetoric. For example, Boris Johnson faced backlash after his comments about European immigrants treating the UK as their own. Racist slurs, xenophobic and Islamophobic tweets and 'jokes' from elected politicians are now common, alongside swift condemnation and promises of 'investigations', followed by quiet reinstatements. Rinse and Repeat.

While it is worrying that the Conservative Party has dragged the UK in the increasingly growing global movement towards the extreme of the political spectrum, it is difficult to predict if these are indications of more deep-seated trends in the party, and in the nation by extension. Will the party reap any real benefit from adopting such problematic and divisive language? Mainstream right-wing political parties in France and Belgium for example, that have borrowed inflammatory far-right rhetoric (if not policies) on national identity, xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments for quick electoral gains, have typically seen their rewards to be short-lived. Voters who are indeed receptive to these themes tend to go back to the 'original' far-right parties, seen as more authentic and uncompromised by power and political games; the most serious implication is arguably how their rhetoric is now infecting the mainstream, lending legitimacy to far-right thesis, and gaining traction amongst broader segments of the population.

The biggest loss of the General Election may have come to the Labour Party, but ultimately the ruling party may have contributed to a long-term shift of British politics further towards the most unsavoury kind of right-wing populism.



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The Brexit Party's impact – if any



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As with UKIP in the previous three general elections, the intrigue generated by Nigel Farage's Brexit Party was not about whether it would win any seats itself, but how it would impact upon the Conservative Party. With Boris Johnson having failed to fulfil his 'do or die' pledge to secure the UK's exit from the EU on 31 October 2019, many Conservatives feared that the Brexit Party would attract support from erstwhile Conservative voters who felt betrayed by Johnson, and that the number of votes lost in the manner would, in some constituencies, deprive the Conservative candidate of victory.

Regardless of this risk, Johnson insisted that he was not willing to do a deal with the Brexit Party, clearly confident that he would retain the support of the vast majority of pro-Brexit Conservative supporters. Part of Johnson's confidence derived from his calculation that if the Brexit Party did deprive the Conservatives of a parliamentary majority on 12 December, this would make the UK's exit from the EU more difficult or less likely; this scenario, he reasoned, would persuade sufficient numbers of putative Conservative voters to remain loyal, rather than be seduced by the blandishments of Farage.

Perhaps realising this, Farage announced, on 11 November, that the Brexit Party would not field candidates in the 317 seats won by the Conservatives in the 2017 election, nor would he himself stand as a candidate. This resulted in an immediate increase in Conservative support, due to erstwhile Brexit Party supporters now switching (back) to the Conservatives, with some polls recording a 19-point lead over Labour, although this lead fluctuated subsequently.

In announcing this withdrawal, Farage declared that the Brexit Party would instead field candidates in seats held by pro-Remain Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs. This, however, prompted anxiety that this too would jeopardise an outright victory for the Conservative Party, due to the potential for Leave voters in these seats to switch to the Brexit Party rather than the Conservatives. This was a particular concern for the Conservatives in some of their 'target' seats in the north of England, and the Midlands, where they had only narrowly been defeated in 2017. Would the Brexit Party's candidature in these seats attract support from more would-be Conservative voters than Labour supporters?

On 12 December itself, the Conservatives won an emphatic victory overall, and in so doing, won many Labour seats in the North of England and the Midlands. However, it is difficult to discern the extent to which the Brexit Party impacted on the result in these constituencies. In several of these seats, as illustrated in Table 1, the tally of votes attracted by the Brexit Party candidate was more than the margin between the victorious

Conservative candidate and the defeated Labour candidate. If the Brexit Party had not contested these seats, would their support have gone instead to the Conservative candidate, thus making their victory in these seats more emphatic, or would such support have remained with Labour, and thereby enabled the latter to retain at least a few more seats? In support of the latter interpretation is the sometimes-heard suggestion that some disillusioned life-long Labour Leavers in the North of England still could not bring themselves to vote Conservative, but were willing to vote for the Brexit Party. If this was the case, in at least some of these seats, the Brexit party did indeed damage Labour electorally, and facilitate the Conservatives' victory.

However, the main reason for Labour's defeat in these seats was a general surge in Conservative support since 2017, while Labour's support was often only marginally down. In a few seats, the Brexit Party might have attracted just enough support from erstwhile Labour voters to deprive of the Party's candidate of victory in 2019, but overall, Labour's electoral woes in 2019 went far wider and deeper than the intervention of the Brexit Party: Boris Johnson's charisma, the trust he inspired that he would "get Brexit done" (regardless of other concerns about his honesty), and the profound unpopularity of Jeremy Corbyn among working-class Labour supporters. In other words, even if the Brexit Party had not fielded any candidates in Labour marginals, the Labour Party would still have suffered a heavy and humiliating defeat overall.

	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Brexit Party</i>	<i>Cons' margin</i>
<i>Bury South</i>	22,034	21,632	1,672	402
<i>Bolton NE</i>	19,759	19,381	1,880	378
<i>Blyth Valley</i>	17,440	16,728	3,394	712
<i>Burnley</i>	15,720	14,368	3,362	1,352
<i>Dewsbury</i>	26,179	24,618	1,874	1,561
<i>Heywood/ Middleton</i>	20,453	19,790	3,952	663
<i>High Peak</i>	24,844	24,254	1,177	590
<i>Leigh</i>	21,266	19,301	3,161	1,965
<i>Stoke-on-Trent Cent</i>	14,557	13,887	1,691	670

Source: BBC, Election 2019 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2019>)

Table 1: A sample of marginal seats won by the Conservatives from Labour, in which the Brexit Party also stood (number of votes won, and margin of Conservative victory over Labour)

Farage: losing the battle to win the war



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Apart from reaction to Nigel Farage's brief BBC interview with Andrew Neil on election night, the Brexit party have seemingly been consigned to become a footnote of modern history and the occasional doctoral thesis. After all, they ended with a paltry 2.0% of the UK vote (5% in the seats they contested) and no MPs. UKIP performed even worse, with 22,817 votes (0.1%). Robert Ford, for example, was typical when he remarked that the Brexit party proved an 'electoral flop', with the main effect of their efforts likely to have saved several Labour incumbents by 'splitting the Leave vote'.

But is this a correct assessment of Nigel Farage's legacy? Arguably, despite being wiped out electorally in this contest, Farage's role has been one of kingmaker in terms of both the predominance of the Brexit policy agenda and the Conservative parliamentary victory in the 2019 General Election. As Giovanni's Sartori observed decades ago, minor parties can still serve a critical function through their 'blackmail' potential, even if they fail to win seats or ministerial office. The impact of Nigel Farage was both direct (as discussed in my other contribution to this collection), and indirect, on the policy agenda.

The entrance of UKIP and then the Brexit party shaped British politics in a profound way indirectly, by mobilizing authoritarian-populist forces and thereby polarizing the country and the policy agenda around the issue of Brexit. Farage tapped into long-term shifts in partisan dealignment and generational shifts in cultural values, which had loosened the salience of the traditional Left-Right economic cleavage and the politics of class, as argued in *Cultural Backlash* – but also their interaction with supply-side factors, including strategic decisions by leaders over Downsian party competition, within a broader context of the opportunities for exerting power and influence within the Westminster electoral system. Mainstream parties on the center-right and center-left can respond to new rivals by strategic attempts at either *exclusion* (treating their new rivals as pariahs) or else *inclusion* (by parroting their competitor's rhetoric and issues positions). Ever since Anthony Downs, the consequences of these strategies have been widely debated in terms of both their electoral effects and their impact on the policy agenda. Farage has obviously failed at gaining office at Westminster – but he has had a profound effect on the policy agenda by forcing other UK parties adapt their policy position towards Europe.

Cases vary, but in many countries, new authoritarian-populist parties have become accepted as legitimate and democratic partners with a seat at the table, thereby directly influencing the issue agenda in parliament and the composition of coalition governments. In Norway, for instance, Siv Jensen's anti-immigrant Progress Party entered

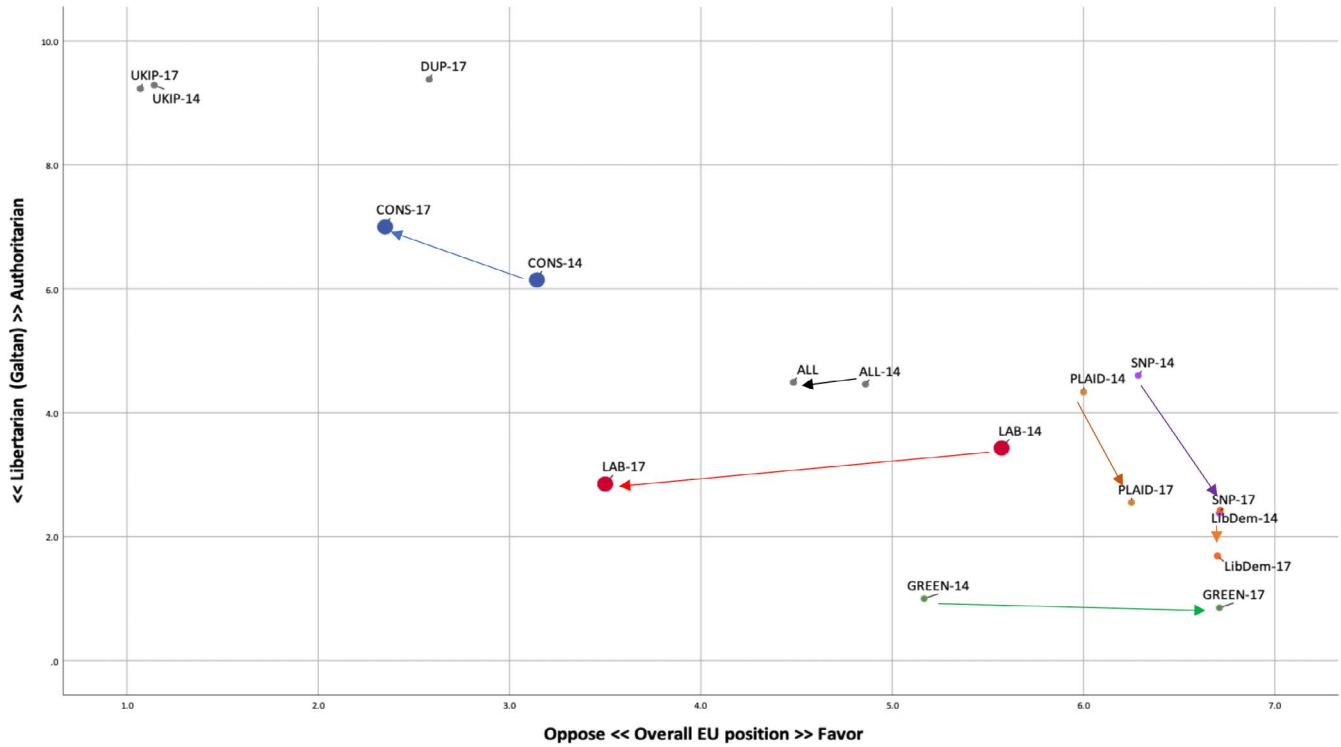
ministerial limos as part of successive center-right coalition governments. In this context, mainstream parties have often sought to *parrot* or adopt the key issues of minor parties, notably by adopting the populist language and more restrictive immigration policies championed by authoritarian-populist, and governing coalitions have stolen key planks from their platforms in election campaigns.

Elsewhere, however, exclusion from entry to governing coalitions is often common. In Germany, for example, the Christian Democratic Union party refused to collude with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), despite their becoming the third largest party in the Bundestag in 2017, in an attempt to erect a cordon sanitaire. In the Netherlands, as well, Mark Rutte's 2017 governing coalition excluded Gert Wilder's Party for Freedom (PVV), in the attempt to deny them credibility and respectability. In extreme cases, some authoritarian-populist parties have been banned by law, for example the racist Flemish Vlaams Blok, or otherwise legally restricted from funding or ballot access.

Even where treated as 'pariahs', however, minor rivals can still impact the policy agenda indirectly, by forcing the mainstream parties to adjust their stances in response to new concerns, in this case by parroting issues of nationalism and immigration. Johnson's unprincipled ambitions, and the machinations of the ERG group, made the Conservative party ripe for a hostile tack-over by populist forces. In this regard, both major parties have absorbed the cancer of Euroscepticism, mobilized by Farage and the ERG Conservatives, and injected this into the mainstream of the body politic.

Therefore, the Brexit Party should go down in the history books as a project which proved an electoral failure at Westminster, losing the general election battle. But in the long-term, Farage played a decisive indirect role by boosting the size of the Conservative's electoral victory, fueling the politics of Brexit and thus influencing the UK's withdrawal from EU membership, strengthening the polarization of UK party competition around cultural cleavages dividing nationalists and cosmopolitans, and even potentially heightening existential threats to the future of the United Kingdom as an independent nation-state.

UK parties respond to Brexit



Note: Overall EU position: the overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration. Galtan: position of the party in terms of their views on democratic freedoms and rights. "Libertarian" parties favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, access to abortion, active euthanasia, same-sex marriage, or greater democratic participation. "Traditional" or "authoritarian" parties often reject these ideas; they value order, tradition, and stability, and believe that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues. **Source:** Calculated from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey on party positions, UK only in 2014 and 2017. <https://www.chesdata.eu>

Party election broadcasts... actually?



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In the 1951 General Election the first ever televised Party Election Broadcasts were the only television content about the campaign (other than the results). By comparison, PEBs achieved less than a tenth of a percent of the television audience share in 2019. Over time, their function has shifted from centre-pieces of party campaigns, to packaged efforts to promote leaders, to agenda-setting vehicles through sometimes controversial content. Much like 2017, though, the majority of the 2019 PEBs came and went with little to no impact or attention at all, bar a couple of notable exceptions.

Whilst some researchers have claimed to show potential influence on voters in the past, partially explaining continued close party attention to them, any influence depends on things like exposure and attention which this year's crop seemed to largely fail to achieve. For all the assertions about differential impacts of different styles of ads, this was possibly because several parties seem to have decided to use essentially the same style of PEB. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party featured PEBs focused on their respective leaders in one PEB and then other PEBs drawing substantively, or exclusively, on the images and voices of candidates, members, and supporters from the general public. They all used incredibly similar film styles, with lots of location shots, talking heads and campaigning imagery, set against orchestral scores. Labour's PEBs had a somewhat melancholy tone, focused on the deprivations of austerity, and this was mirrored by a surprisingly similar tone to the Brexit Party PEBs, though the focus there was on the blocking of Brexit, and by the Lib Dems in turn, who focused on the frustrations of the major parties. The Lib Dems including former Tory and Labour MPs alongside Jo Swinson may, with hindsight, be seen as a mistake given how they all lost their seats. The Greens, always trying to use PEBs to agenda-set, centred both of their PEBs on Caroline Lucas, the second of them, "If not now, when?", featuring Lucas in a grainy, black and white, extreme close-up single shot, offering an almost poetic monologue, with little response (just 10,000 views on Youtube to date [with all figures that follow correct at the time of writing]).

The only PEBs that seemed to generate wider attention were the Conservative ones at the beginning and end of the campaign, both using notable gimmick approaches. The first, "Twelve Questions to Boris", provoked debate, partly about the superficial questions he was being asked in what was a mock interview on the hoof (fish and chips or Sunday roast; marmite yes or no) but predominantly over his preparation of a cup of tea by putting milk in with the tea bag still in it, and then not taking the tea bag out. What *The Sun* (and others) dubbed a 'Storm in a Teacup', even made international news as far afield as New Zealand, and drew comparisons to the cringeworthy

comedy of *The Office*. In an era where almost every action or statement is now taken to be a "dead cat strategy" to divert attention from substance, whether by accident or strategic intent, it did at least draw attention to the PEB (viewed 261,000 times on YouTube), even if the Prime Minister's inability to make a proper cup of tea wasn't the level of faux pas the debates suggested it might/should have been.

Towards the end of the campaign, "Vote Conservative, Actually", also generated substantial public attention (606,000 views on YouTube). Parodying a scene in what is now a classic British Christmas movie, *Love, Actually*, the PEB features Boris again. A key scene in the movie features Andrew Lincoln silently declaring his love for (married woman) Keira Knightly through a series of cards which he shows her whilst standing at her door and carol singer music plays. The PEB has Boris in Lincoln's role, with cards spelling out plans to get Brexit done. Hugh Grant, one of the stars of *Love Actually* and an active Remainder who canvassed for several pro-Remain candidates, was asked for his view on the PEB on Radio 4. He noted that unlike the original film "one of the cards ... Boris Johnson didn't hold up was the one saying 'Because at Christmas you tell the truth'". Others noted the irony of recreating a scene where a man declares his love for a married woman, with Boris' notorious personal history.

Deliberately copying *Love, Actually*, and making something that others likened to *The Office*, arguably illustrates as clearly as anything else Johnson's populist approach, one others may follow in future, as well as indicating that whilst PEBs may be receding ever further into electoral insignificance, they still, on occasion, can play a distinctive role.



Figure 1: 'Vote Conservative, Actually', Conservatives, 2019



Figure 2: '12 Questions for Boris', Conservatives, 2019

GE 2019: lessons for political branding



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The 2019 UK General Election is a good example of political 'brands' contesting their position on differing levels. Not only was it a contest between political parties, each promoting their political brand position, it was also a contest between the party leaders and their personal brands. When reflecting upon the 2019 General Election, three key lessons about political branding become apparent:

The importance of a brand positioning that is clear and in sympathy with electoral sentiment

This was probably the most apparent lesson learned about political brands in the 2019 General Election. The two parties that succeeded most, the Conservative Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP), had leaders that advocated a clear brand position (Brexit and Scottish independence respectively) and it was one that their target market sympathised with. In contrast, whilst the Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson also advocated a clear position, the resolute 'revoke' stance sat uncomfortably with many of her usual supporters who felt it undemocratic to simply cancel the result of the Brexit Referendum.

The clear stance adopted by the Conservatives, SNP and Liberal Democrats stood in sharp contrast to the apparently conflicted position adopted by The Labour Party. Jeremy Corbyn's purposefully neutral stance to Brexit contrasted sharply with the position held by senior figures within the Labour Party who supported a 'remain' stance toward the EU. Moreover, their communication strategy appeared fragmented as a number of initiatives and policies were proposed but a coherent vision to draw them together wasn't communicated well. As a result, the positioning of both the party and the leader appeared to lack definition, consistency and direction.

It's important to have a profile but all publicity is not necessarily good publicity

During the election it became clear that whilst media exposure was valuable, it was equally important that exposure should be positive. The refusal of ITV to allow Liberal Democrat Party leader Jo Swinson to take part in their Leaders' Debate undermined the credibility of her claim as a potential Prime Minister in waiting. Compounded by a poor performance on the BBC Question Time Leaders' Debate and limited coverage of her day-to-day campaigning, Swinson's message struggled to gain traction and both her approval rates and voting intentions for the party plummeted.

Conservative leader Boris Johnson and Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn also suffered embarrassing media incidents. Jeremy Corbyn received savage treatment at the hands of the BBC's Andrew Neil whilst Boris Johnson was openly laughed at by the audience during the BBC Question Time Special.

Both leaders suffered confrontations by members the public and there was some nervousness on the part of party managers as to how the leaders, and particularly Johnson (who had a reputation as a loose cannon) might respond. As a result, there were a number of instances where the two leaders either refused to attend events/interviews or sent proxies in their place. Clearly it was felt that the ridicule suffered as a result of a non-appearance would be preferable to potential damage that might come out of difficult questioning or an unsupportive audience response.

The importance of 'likeability'

'Likeability', or lack of it, appeared to be a determining factor over the course of the election. It has already been noted that Jo Swinson struggled to gain approval following poor media performances but Labour's Jeremy Corbyn also appeared to suffer from a lack of likability. Media reports suggested that voters simply didn't warm to him and this was not helped by some rather ill-tempered responses when questioned about his leadership or ability to deal with anti-Semitism within the party. In contrast, the Conservative Party appeared much more successful in cultivating their leader's likability. Repeated questioning suggested there were clearly issues around trust but these were minimised by legitimising his unconventional and slightly comic persona with the use of novel and engaging media opportunities. Examples of note include the creation of a parody of the film 'Love Actually' entitled 'Brexit Actually' and a visit to the JCB factory where numerous photo opportunities were created when Johnson crashed a bulldozer through a wall of bricks.

In summary, it was clear that the winners in the 2019 UK General Election were those that adopted a clear brand positioning strategy. Ambiguity and/or neutrality on the part of a party or its leader was not well received. However, as we can see from the winners in this election, it wasn't enough to have a clear position, the position also had to be one that was defensible and communicated by a leader that the electorate liked, if not trusted.

The postmodern election

Social theory tells us that postmodernity is the condition of culture in which the social structures which have shaped the modern world have largely dissolved. De-industrialisation fragments the class structure, psycho-cultural changes rework gender roles and family life, all traditional values including the primacy of reason itself come under challenge, and little or nothing can be taken as settled. Our 2019 General Election looks like the one in which democratic politics became fully postmodern.

To being with, the issue which for many people has defined the election - Brexit - is in large part an artefact. Being in or out of Europe was not a major preoccupation of the British public until the referendum. Led by Leave but with Remain in pursuit, propaganda around and since the referendum has resulted in us believing we were at war with each other on an issue of fundamental identity. In a major example of a 'media effect', this most bitter election has been fought over a contrivance, in which a grossly simplified binary has been heaped with cultural and emotional meanings which mostly belong elsewhere. It is a massive case of postmodern irony then that 'Brexit' was the reason for the election and the sole theme of the Conservative campaign, and was one of two or three major factors in determining its outcome.

Admittedly, traditional class-based ideology could also be seen in the campaign, in the emphasis Labour's manifesto placed on redistribution and on state intervention in public utilities. While these policies expressed the enthusiasm of the recent cohorts of Labour support, some other voters were alienated from Labour by this. However the extent of this effect is not known, and without further analysis the claim that this was evidence of wide public distaste for more radical economic policies cannot be sustained, especially given that the core economic proposals could have been presented more persuasively and without the less plausible add-ons. It may be that other non-class based ideological issues, linked to Jeremy Corbyn and Labour's general political leadership, were the most important – for example, the ideas that he was 'soft' on terrorism and on anti-Semitism within the party, and the party conference resolution on expanding immigration.

Whether ideology of any sort was a major factor or not, Corbyn's unpopularity as a leader certainly was, combining as it did with the 'Brexit' factor to drive hundreds of thousands of long-term Labour voters away from the party and thereby delivering Johnson's majority. This takes us to the most fundamentally postmodern feature of the election: the stage it marks in the decay of the party system, at least as all living memories have known it. While the Conservative majority may bring a deceptive stability to Parliament it does not represent stability in public opinion. Johnson won, as he says, on borrowed votes, and once

the Brexit glue dries out his one-off constituency will fall apart. The Labour Party has a chance to begin a radical reconstruction of its place in the eyes and feelings of the public in the upcoming leadership contest, but Corbynism has exposed the depth of its divisions, and cast it as the place where egalitarian idealism goes to die (electorally).

And even if either or both of the major parties can hang together, more fundamentally the electorate is no longer segmented in the orderly way which brought some legitimacy to a two- or three-party system. In postmodern times we are more individualised, which is by no means all a bad thing. It brings psychological and cultural richness, for those materially secure. But politically it means chaos, at least during a long transition, and amongst some parts of the public it brings a hunger for the comforting togetherness of regressive populism. Also, the sceptical stance of postmodern thinking towards all traditional authorities has been a liberating cultural force, yet at the same time in politics it has ushered in the nightmare of a 'post truth' public sphere. And a very substantial minority of voters in this election, for both the major parties, have cast their votes for a leader they wouldn't trust. This may be an extreme example of old-fashioned cynical pragmatism, or a sign that in the turbulence of postmodernity, the trust on which democracy depends is now in jeopardy (or perhaps it is both).

Moreover, even within ourselves, we are not coherent citizenly units, but endlessly varied bundles of values, impressions and impulses. The postmodern self is a complex and changeable entity: not the de-centred flux as some cultural theorists would have it, but still more open-ended than the highly structured modal self of classical modernity. Whether any of our existing political parties can be re-tooled in order to be able to address the postmodern public remains to be seen.



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Policy and strategy

The uses and abuses of the left-right distinction in the campaign

The left/right distinction is a familiar interpretive frame through which to make sense of political divisions and disagreements, but its status, character, and relevance are highly contested. British politics has, in recent years, seen a range of starkly opposed narratives not only between left and right political positions, but also about the continued relevance and viability of the left/right distinction itself.

Simplifying somewhat, the 2019 General Election saw two main narratives about the changing shape of the left/right distinction. One suggested that 2019 was significant in part because it coincided with a reinvigoration of the left/right distinction within British political life. This narrative asserts that the Conservatives under Johnson, and Labour under Corbyn, embraced a politics more unambiguously right and left (respectively) than their predecessors. Johnson's Conservatives were seen by many as tapping into a groundswell of right-wing nationalism and nativism. Conversely, Corbyn's Labour found itself frequently characterised as 'hard left'. Thus, much commentary during the election campaign highlighted, and frequently bemoaned, the supposed abandonment by both parties of their centrist, moderate wings. Consequently, and in contrast to the ideological convergence that marked British politics for much of the 90s and 2000s, 2017 and, especially, 2019 saw the major parties standing on clearly demarcated policy platforms, in which voters had a clear and unambiguous choice between left and right.

A second narrative suggests that far from becoming more relevant, the left/right distinction has become an arcane device ill suited to the various divisions and antagonisms that shape contemporary British society. Evidence offered in support of this view includes: the relatively small percentage of voters who have a clear self-perception as either left or right; the displacing of left vs right by a whole series of other axes of division (e.g. 'open' versus 'closed', 'somewheres' versus 'anywheres', young versus old); and the increasing salience of cultural values at the expense of economic factors. The pivoting of many voters in the so-called 'Labour heartlands' towards the Conservatives is further grist to the mill of those who say that, in the age of Brexit, the left/right distinction no longer holds. Indeed, it seems likely that, following the electoral failure of a left platform, the pressure on the Labour Party to a return to a centrist politics 'beyond left and right' will intensify over the coming months.

But we should be wary of such claims. Irrespective of where one situates oneself on the left/right spectrum, we abandon it at our peril. As Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe has powerfully argued, a clearly delineated left/right distinction is essential for a vibrant, flourishing public sphere.

Perhaps controversially, I would argue that the partial polarisation of British politics along the left/right axis in recent years has been positive in terms of citizen interest, engagement and participation in democratic politics, in stark contrast to the depoliticised technocracy and managerialism of the New Labour era. In many cases, therefore, the desire to bury or 'move beyond' the left/right distinction can function as a thinly concealed attempt to delegitimise all but a fairly narrow range of political opinion. Furthermore, the 2019 General Election was a victory for a revitalised right-wing of the Conservative Party. Consequently, we need the left/right distinction as an analytic frame if we are to come to terms with how and why the Conservatives won on a more unashamedly right-wing platform than in previous elections.

But if we agree that we need to retain the left/right distinction, this begs the question of precisely how the left/right distinction is understood. Often, left and right are cast as indices of political attitudes, particularly in relation to specific economic indicators such as taxation, public spending, and wealth distribution. But this 'economistic' understanding of left and right is too limited, especially at a time when contemporary political movements and identities do not cleanly correspond with class positions, or economic factors. Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio famously argued that left and right should be understood in relation to the relative priority afforded to equality and inequality within different political movements and projects. Consequently, to be 'left-wing' is to be motivated by what Bobbio calls 'the emotive value of equality', rather than whether not you support particular levels of taxation or redistribution.

Going forward, a more fluid and dynamic understanding of the left/right distinction – along the lines of what Bobbio describes – could become a major asset in our on-going attempts to make sense of a highly fractious and confusing political moment, while also seeking to cultivate citizen interest and engagement in democratic politics. As the dust settles from the upheavals of the 2019 General Election, we must doggedly resist on-going attempts by politicians and pundits at to consign the left/right distinction to the dustbin of history.



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Entitlement and incoherence: centrist ‘bollocks’



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In experimental economics, ultimatum games measure individuals' distributive behaviour. Two players participate. The first has \$10 and is tasked with making an offer to distribute an amount to the second player. If the second accepts the offer, both keep their respective shares. If they decline, they both lose.

Homo economicus assumes individuals are rational, self-interested and concerned with absolute gains. Even an offer of \$0.01 should be sufficient for the second player to accept, since they are materially better off. However, time and again, in a range of cultural contexts, players reject offers even approaching \$5. This finding indicates individuals are concerned with relative, not absolute, gains and that there is a species-wide sense of fairness that leads to acts of spite when presented with insulting offers. We saw that in action on Thursday night.

For the last three years, Centrists have campaigned relentlessly against the leadership of the Labour Party and, to a lesser degree, the Conservative Party, on the basis of Brexit. Woke Labour Centrists, apparent Lib Dem and Green allies and the 'liberal' media made a case for Remain that had already been rejected in 2016 and 2017 and was increasingly being rejected, viscerally, on the ground in constituencies that Labour needed to hold or win.

Beyond the centrist echo chamber, anger was palpable about the contempt in which voters were being held. Put simply, over the past three years, Leave voters and their family members who voted Remain but respected democratic decision making, were told that they were 'thick', 'brainwashed', 'racist' and 'self-defeating'. The only justification given for revising their decision was that their lives would get worse by leaving the EU.

While some are racist and many lives will certainly get worse as a result of this election, for many the notion of their lives getting even worse is a bit of a stretch. After 40 years of decline in the EU, in which no substantive measures have been taken to invest in declining communities and reasonable concerns about the effect of migration on those areas and working conditions were rejected as racist, many people just could not see their lives could get worse. Hence, the biggest motivating factor for those who voted Conservative for the first time can be seen in the behaviour of players who reject pitiful ultimatum game offers. These voters were being given the proverbial \$0.01 offer by actors who were ubiquitous and utterly self-obsessed.

Now, everyone bar the 1% will lose, those losing the most would have benefited most from the first systematic attempt at reconfiguring our country since 1945. Labour's Manifesto was the only project capable of restoring Labour heartlands. But time and again, voters, including those who had voted Labour in 2017, said that they

would not back a party frustrating the will of the people led by someone who was weak or actively hostile to their interests.

Centrist analyses of the catastrophe are already focusing exclusively on the weakness of Corbyn, but that fails to take into account the effect of four years of effective, but disastrously self-defeating, lobbying and bullying by a conspiratorial liberal wing of the establishment. The most effective vehicle for tarnishing a 70 year old vegetarian, anti-racist peace campaigner as a racist, terrorist Remainer, has been a vapid, self-absorbed Centrist cult who used wedge issues to advance a policy to which the leadership was intuitively opposed and to frame party discipline issues as being wholly disproportionate to reality. Studies show a third of voters thought Labour was anti-Semitic, despite only 0.08% of members being found to have committed anything remotely anti-Semitic. That is due to the work of Watson et al, attacking Corbyn to recapture the party for the Centrist cult. Those of us who live in the heartlands knew exactly how this would pan out and feared watching our family members suffer.

The evidence of this election offers a remarkable insight into Centrist thinking and strategy: campaign for Remain in the wake of defeat and get the hardest of hard Brexits; campaign against the leadership on the assumption that everyone shares the same fetishistic dinner party concerns about the impact on European identity.

Niemöller famously stated 'First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist'. In the case of Labour Centrists and the liberal establishment, 'First they came for the socialists and I helped because I was not a socialist and felt entitled to leadership'. Spite is powerful and we are headed for a generation of it. Centrists need to own it, but they will likely just pay a trivial visa fee and head to their châteaux in the Dordogne. As the Lib Dems would put it, that's just 'bollocks'.

Brexit doesn't mean Brexit, but the pursuit of power

The 2019 General Election was widely touted as 'the Brexit election' by both the Conservatives and some broadcasters. No doubt Brexit was an important issue looming large in light of significant parliamentary and courtroom battles for much of the year. It will be suggested that - to borrow Theresa May's phrase - the saying 'Brexit means Brexit' is deceptive because its primary purpose is to serve as a means, not an end, for the pursuit of political power.

The original decision to support an EU referendum was taken by David Cameron before the 2015 General Election. Five years earlier, the Tories had failed to win a majority and had to settle for forming an uneasy coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The cause was Nigel Farage's UKIP taking a slice of voters from the Tories.

Cameron's offer of a referendum worked in the general election by ending UKIP's threat and gaining a small parliamentary majority. But Brexit was never planned for or wanted. A year later Cameron rushed a referendum only to lose and exit office. His successor, May, spent the first months of her term fighting lost causes in the courts possibly to make them scapegoats for the inability to realise Brexit. Ultimately, she never succeeded and Boris Johnson became Prime Minister over the summer.

Johnson made much of the repeated mantra 'get Brexit done'. This undoubtedly appealed to pro-Leave voters and Farage's new Brexit Party posed no real threat after the latter agreed only to stand in a one-third of seats instead of all — and winning none.

But that phrase 'get Brexit done' was also successful for two further reasons. The first is it gave a simple, clear message about what the Tories would do if they won. In contrast, Labour published multiple manifestos that probably diffused their message, rendered less clear their priorities and timetable for delivering on them.

The second success of 'get Brexit done' was it resonated with voters who wanted get news coverage about Brexit done. Over three years, there has been much fatigue among the public in making heads or tails of how progress has or has not been made. With over 18,000 EU laws to sift through and a 40+ year institutional relationship, some likened Brexit to separating ingredients from a cake after baking it. It's certainly a sticky and complex matter for even a trained expert in EU law.

This latter reason suggests that 'get Brexit done' had traction not because the public wants Brexit, but because the public wants to move on from it. While the government made clear Brexit means a new Australian-styled points-based immigration system, the truth is such a system was launched by Labour in 2008. If this is the big signature policy change, Brexit isn't needed.

Within 24 hours of reopening Parliament,

Johnson outlined plans to change the withdrawal agreement he asked voters to back to cut workers' rights and environmental protections. He also suggested a review of the BBC's licence fee.

A US study in the 1990s found that Americans would most often say they were for or against capital punishment based on whether they thought it was a deterrent, but the real reasons for supporting one side or another was based on values separate from deterrence. It is suggested here that Brexit's origins and future lies mostly in using it as a means for the pursuit of other domestic ends like reshaping rights, the BBC and more. Whether this prediction is correct can be tested in five years, but signs are strong already.



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What ever happened to euroscepticism?



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One of the defining features of British politics in recent decades has been the critical discussion of European integration. And this election was called because of a major issue about the European Union (EU). So surely this is the apotheosis of euroscepticism?

Well, not really.

If we understand euroscepticism to be about challenging some aspect of European integration, then we've seen hardly any expression of that during the 2019 campaign.

What there has been is much discussion about fulfilling the result of the 2016 referendum on EU membership, but couched entirely in terms of democracy and legitimacy in the British political system. "get Brexit done" says nothing about the EU and everything about the UK.

This might seem to be a narrow academic question, one of definitions, but it reflects the troubled place of 'Europe' in the British political debate.

Consider that the only extensive critique of the EU and its operation came from the Green Party, who devoted several pages of their manifesto to outlining reforms at the constitutional, institutional and policy levels, even as they strongly advocated continued membership.

By contrast, neither the Conservatives nor the Brexit Party discussed the nature of the EU per se, but only the necessity of securing withdrawal (and a new trade agreement in the Tories' case).

This is not to say that the EU hasn't been a major part of the political discussion, but rather to argue that euroscepticism is much more about the national context than the European one.

Consider the party manifestoes.

Given the centrality of Brexit, one might anticipate that much of their wider programmes would depend upon the particular form of relationship with the EU that they sought to secure. That might be because being out of the EU might open up some political paths not currently available, or because being in the EU allows the UK to secure changes within the organisation.

With the usual caveats about the difficulties of weighting the significance of different manifesto commitments, we can still see from the graph that this is not actually the case.

By breaking down manifestoes into their sections and gauging the extent which there is a dependency, it is quickly evident that for all parties, most of what they propose has nothing to do with the EU at all, and in most of the remaining cases, it hasn't got much to do with it either.

Even in the case of the Tories, with the highest dependency at roughly a quarter of their manifesto, much hangs on the specifics of the future relationship that they would negotiate with the EU. That relationship is presented as a list of objectives, rather than as an engagement with the functioning of the European Union itself, as

underlined by the rather confused language on Northern Ireland.

In short, the EU is largely externalised from the British political debate.

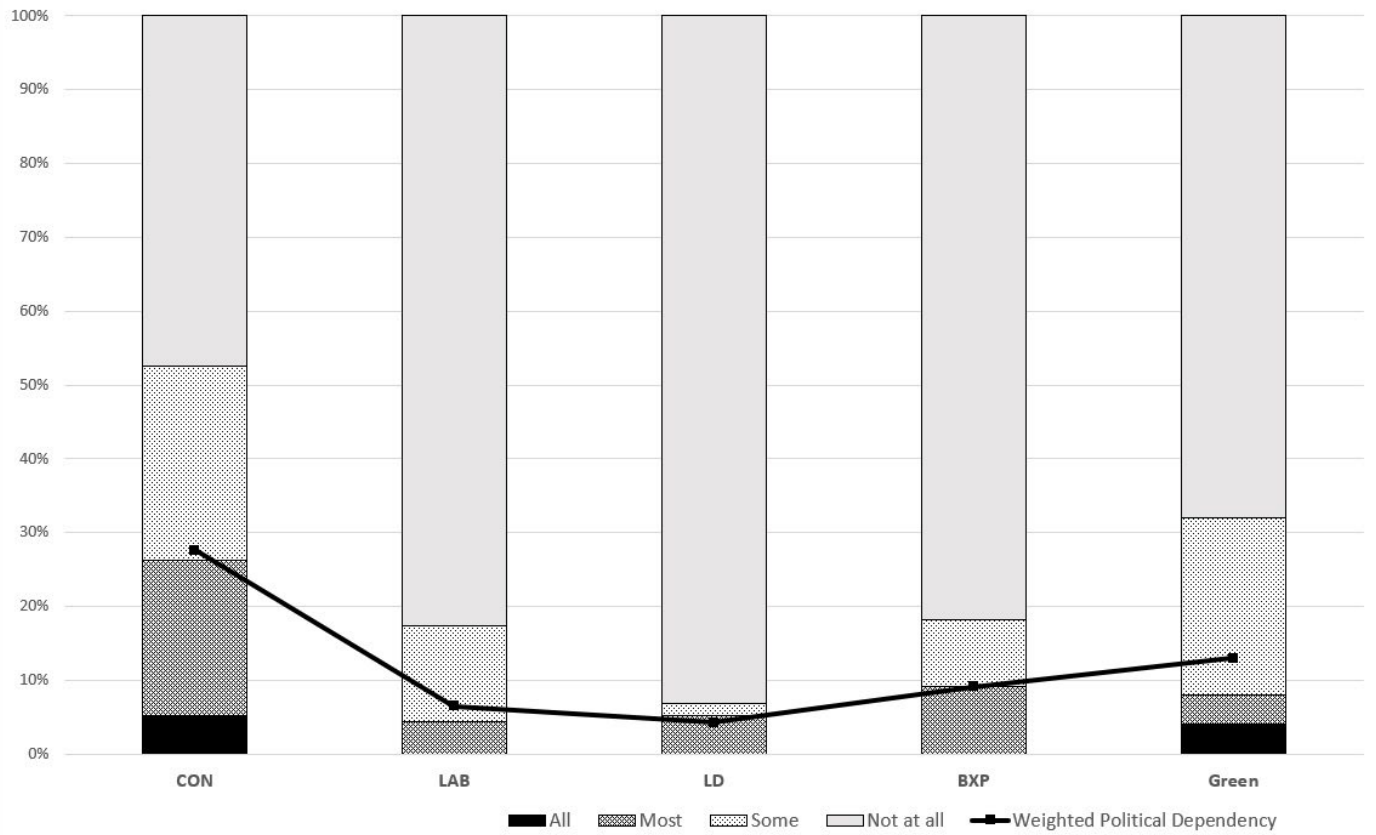
It is there, but as a largely abstract entity to be either got away from or to be embraced closely. For those that would leave, the Union is presented as a body that will simply give the UK what it wants – monies owed, deals delivered, access granted – without any sense of how the eurosceptic critiques of the past – self-interest, inefficiency, not listening to the UK – might anyhow make this problematic, especially as the UK moves from being a member state to a third country.

But the pro-European side also raises issues. While the years since the referendum have seen a blossoming of overt European rhetoric and action, that has not been accompanied by the development of more grounded and engaged view of how the EU works.

In essence, this general election has been a continuation of very polarised views on the EU: those in support of membership seem very largely bound to treat it uncritically, while those against mostly wish it away.

Whether either approach is one that will withstand the realities of the coming year, as the country moves into the next stage of Brexit, is highly questionable. What is clear already at this point is that euroscepticism has been better at providing questions than answers.

How much of the parties' manifestoes depend upon the outcome of Brexit?



Immigration in the 2019 General Election campaign



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Of all of the contentious issues sublimated by the term 'Brexit' during this General Election, arguably the most significant of all has been immigration. Significantly and prominently featured during the referendum debate of 2016, with 'leave' voting widely attributed to negative social attitudes, immigration remained very concerning to voters, including in the UK ahead of the 2018 Parliamentary Elections. However, whilst public concerns continue to be negative, polling and other research evidence strongly suggest they have 'softened'. IPSOS MORI data indicate a significant decline in immigration's salience as 'the most important issue' facing Britain since the 2016 referendum, overtaken by the NHS and the European Union. These, ostensibly less anxious, attitudes towards immigration have attracted commentary in the mainstream media, including, for example, the BBC's 'Crossing Divides' season earlier this year. So, if no longer a pre-eminent issue for public concern, how did immigration play a role in the public discourse during the election campaign?

Mainstream Party Policies

Across the manifestos we saw a general consensus on establishing distance from Theresa May's 'hostile environment', albeit to varying degrees and with different substance. Recognition that many of the consequences of May's approach were profoundly damaging (not least the Windrush scandal) and a more pro-migration tone could be traced in the Labour, Liberal Democrats and Green manifestos. Advocating recognition of the social and economic benefits of migration, an automatic right to residency for EU nationals already in Britain, equality for all workers with a right to be in the country, and the closure of immigration detention centres were key promises of both Labour and the Greens. Another anti-hostile-environment measure from the Liberal Democrats proposed the re-distribution of specific visa granting powers away from the Home Office to other departments, such as Business, Education and the Department for International Development. A more positive focus on the benefits of migration also typified the nationalist parties' manifestos, with Plaid Cymru and the SNP each proposing 'needs based systems' and visas specifically designed for the Scottish and Welsh economies. Conservative proposals, moved away from arbitrary net migration targets associated with the 'hostile environment', instead promising to end freedom of movement for EU citizens, fast tracking 'highly skilled' migrants, e.g., through a cheaper 'NHS Visa', and reducing numbers through an 'Australian-style' points based system (a similar policy on the latter was included in DUP proposals).

Whilst some of these policies appeared to

enjoy greater traction than others in the press, coverage largely seemed to follow established partisan editorial lines, including extensive repetition of Conservative attacks on Labour in right-wing publications (including misrepresentations of policy, for example on freedom of movement), and support for Labour plans in the Daily Mirror. The policies of other parties on immigration appeared to receive very little coverage in the national titles.

Press Coverage

When we look at the prominence of immigration as an issue across the major national newspapers during the six weeks leading up to polling day¹, we see that it was certainly not ignored or marginalised by the standards of recent election campaigns.

Coverage intensified in week 3 with the trailing of Labour and Tory manifestos, and the first leaders' debate on 19th November, and then again in the final week, as key campaign messages were reiterated, including in Boris Johnson's letter to the nation, warning against the 'nightmare' of a potential Labour win. Somewhat more unexpectedly, football pundit Gary Neville's comments on the racist abuse of Manchester United players were also widely reported, where he blamed Boris Johnson for fuelling racism in language about immigration during the Leaders' debate.

In polling week, the Daily Mirror suggested that 'Immigration is the dog that hasn't barked in this election' (8th December), attributing this, in part, to wider recognition of the benefits of immigration to the country. Although Labour's social media video advertising sought to challenge misdirected hostility towards migrants and transform the debate, realistically it is doubtful that this message would have landed with readers of a right-wing press strongly supporting the "Tory crackdown on post-Brexit migrants", and the equation of Labour's immigration policy with an 'open borders' security threat, over-burdening the NHS, and a betrayal of democracy. A familiar collection of hostile tropes on immigration, it was articulated all the more powerfully as an ominous and obvious flipside to "delivering Brexit". Johnson's late controversial claim that "membership of the EU meant its population of 580 million had been able to treat the UK as though its basically part of their own country", should arguably be seen, then, as merely the loud, concluding 'bark' of a concerted dog whistling campaign.

¹ Data for both figures based on basic search of Nexis: 6 weeks leading to polling day; keywords: immigrat or migral or "asylum seeker!" or refugeeel; No manual filtering applied.

Figure 1: Immigration coverage comparison by election (n=12261)

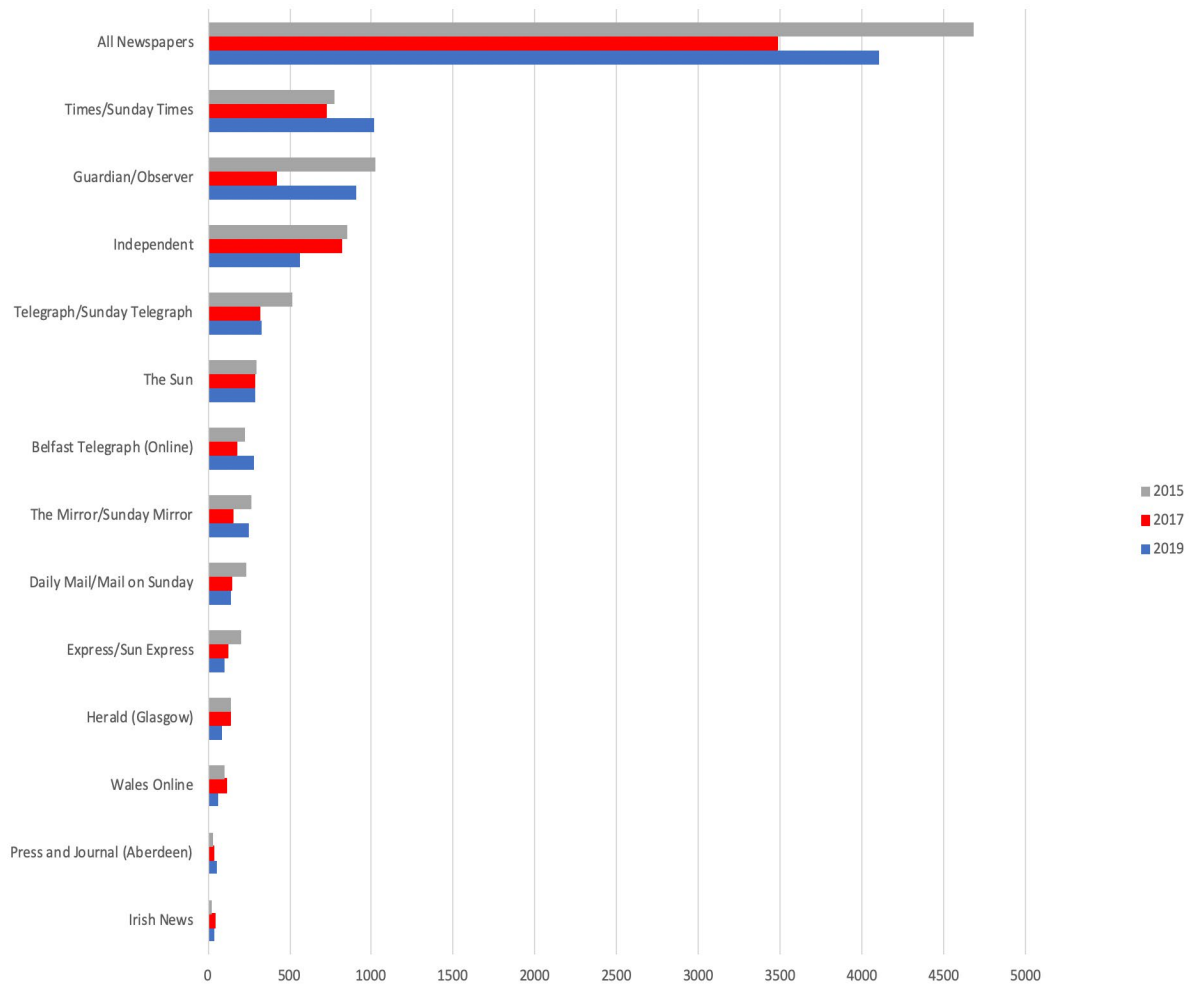
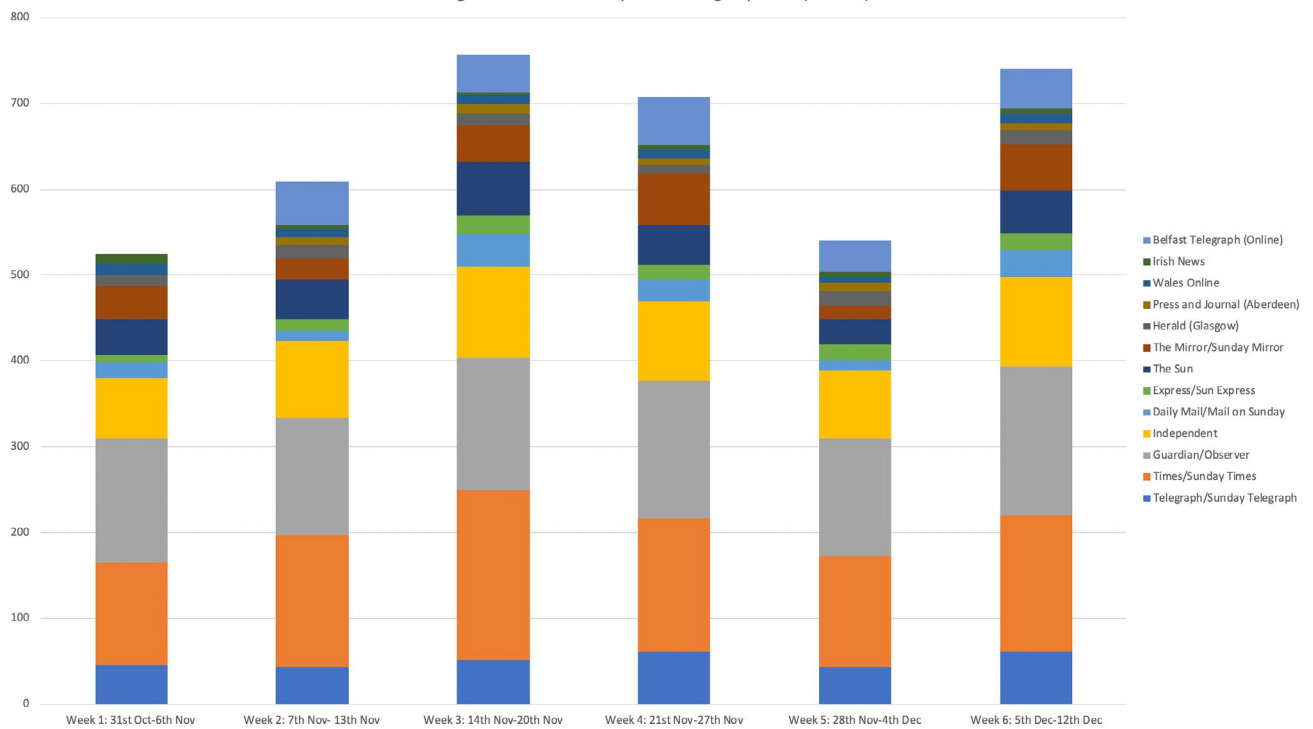


Figure 2: Election 2019 press coverage by week (n=3879)



Immigration in party manifestos: threat or resource?



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At the beginning of this General Election campaign immigration was the 7th important issue for British adults. This confirmed the gradual decline of the issue during the past years from the most important issue facing Britain (June 2016), to the 3rd (June 2017), and the 10th (September 2019). It was clearly not on the main radar this year. Nevertheless, it was frequently invoked by all parties and candidates in relation to the main issues: Brexit and NHS. My analysis draws on critical discourse studies to explore how the manifestos referred to immigration.

Conservatives: "get Brexit done. Unleash Britain's potential" with "the best and the brightest"

Immigration is a problem to be solved and controlled through a commitment re-enforced by the candidate's personal guarantee and signature. The imaginary of a catastrophic, fictitious scenario is re-enacted: immigration is a threat that requires fixing and taking back control of borders. Our borders. The main narrative of the 2016 EU referendum is heavily instrumentalized to remind of the danger and set the grounds for the populist leader, the saviour, who has the solution: the Australian-style points-based immigration system, an inclusion – exclusion vision legitimized through appeal to competency and skills. Finally, the main promise: *attracting the best and the brightest*, while *there will be fewer lower-skilled migrants and overall numbers will come down*; less of 'them' for the protection of 'us', 'our' NHS and 'our' benefits system. This is the Conservative vision of making the immigration system more *fair and compassionate*.

Labour: "It's Time for Real Change" with "a humane immigration system"

The Labour vision on immigration is presented as centred on *human rights* and *aimed at meeting the skills and labour shortages* as opposed to the *hostile environment* system attributed to Tories. Furthermore, the Windrush scandal is invoked and powerful imagery is used to illustrate the extent of damage that led to *British citizens being deported*. Immigrants are considered a positive resource *enriching society*. The core idea of change is not explicitly mentioned in the Migration section of the manifesto, being replaced by *decisive action*. The actions are legitimized through a perpetuation strategy of pointing out the failures of current system, attributing the blame to Conservative and Liberal Democrats policies and augmenting the consequences: *undermined our economy and public services, encouraged the demonisation of migrants and the use of residents as bargaining chips*. The party's position on Brexit is reflected through a strategy of balancing the outcome of both leave and remain scenarios with the pledge of respecting *our values and domestic laws* while respecting EU and UK citizens' rights.

SNP: "Stronger for Scotland". "Scotland relies on migration for growing our population"

Immigration is explicitly framed as a *resource* for the growth and development of an independent Scotland, in a firm stand for freedom of movement and *against the demonisation of migrants*. It is legitimized in opposition to Westminster's *broken policies* (including the *hostile immigration environment*) and more broadly to the current 'dependency' that limits the overall development potential of Scotland. Furthermore, the promises have been broken, thus there can only be a radical, transformation solution, justified by the appeal to *our right as a country to decide our own future*: the break with the status-quo in a mission personally assumed and signed by the candidate Nicola Sturgeon - *it's time to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands*.

Liberal Democrats: "Stop Brexit. Build a Brighter Future" with "a compassionate and effective immigration system"

The Lib Dems' vision on immigration revolves around a diagnostic: *Britain's immigration system is in desperate need of reform*. This is supported with statements and evaluations of a current disastrous situation, linked either to key issues (NHS' impossibility to recruit) or appeals to emotions (separation of families due to visa requirements; people detained indefinitely). The blame is directly attributed to the *Conservatives' hostile environment* (illustrated symbolically by the Windrush generation), as well as to the Labour and Conservatives previous Home Secretaries. The party positions itself as having the solution to this crisis, emphasizing their unique offer: *the only party with a plan for a fair migration system that works for everyone*. Welcoming migrants and restoring confidence in the system are the key pillars of their plan. Migrants are considered a resource for the skills and contribution they bring, therefore the first actions in the plan are *Stop Brexit and save EU freedom of movement*.

Overall, immigration is a resource for Labour, SNP and Lib Dems that label unanimously the Conservatory system *hostile environment* and symbolically instrumentalize the Windrush scandal. The SNP campaigned for independence; the Lib Dems claimed a radical reform; Labour's change was weakened into *decisive action*. The Conservatives were consistent in re-enforcing their 2016 main narrative and capitalized on the need for direction: uncontrolled immigration is a threat; take back control and get Brexit done. And now, it looks like they will.

Foreign policy in the 2019 election

Foreign policy does not tend to be a hot topic in general elections, with some notable exceptions. Manifestos tend to include platitudes and largely meaningless phrases, outlining some broad brushstrokes of policy, but with very little tangible detail, reflecting the changing nature of foreign policy, and the dynamics involved in international relations. A quick glance at the positioning of foreign policy in the Labour and Conservative Party manifestos will give you some idea of its lack of prominence during election time, starting on page 51 in the Conservative party manifesto and page 95 in the Labour party manifesto. There are, however, key differences between the two parties on foreign policy, not just in policy terms but also in style, which is more unusual to see and a result of the leadership of Corbyn and the move of the Labour party away from the centre of British politics.

The Conservative manifesto includes a fairly traditional, some might even say staid, outline of their foreign policy aims. There is certainly nothing dynamic in the manifesto coming from the party being led by a former Foreign Secretary. Instead, the section on foreign policy includes discussion of the armed forces, some mention of Brexit and even a short section on international sporting events. The manifesto is heavy on values but light on detail, implying that the Conservatives are the party of the armed forces and the protector of British values. There is a commitment to maintaining the headline figure of 0.7% GDP funding for overseas development aid, and support for several of the UN Millennium Development Goals, but no detail on how these lofty aims will be achieved.

This is grist to the mill for manifestos but particularly noticeable in an age where the consequences of Brexit will mean foreign affairs takes on a new significance and any government will have to be very clear on which international friendships they need to maintain. For the Conservatives, foreign policy is presented in a very traditional way, with a focus on military strength and an underlying assumption that Britain is a key global player and will remain so. Of course, that narrative will not only be warmly received by Conservative party supporters, but is also necessary for a party staking its political reputation on its pro-Brexit credentials and ability to “get Brexit done”. To admit any potential damage to Britain’s global standing or reputation at the hands of the Conservative party would be unthinkable, and the manifesto reflects this, projecting only strength.

The Labour party manifesto is noticeably different to that of the Conservatives, although different does not automatically mean better. The Labour manifesto has a ‘lead in’ section entitled “A New Internationalism” which outlines the general aims of the party. The focus here is on multilateralism, more co-operation with other nations and

a ‘ask question first, act later’ approach. The party tries to put its Iraqi ghosts to bed by indicating it will enact all the recommendations of the Chilcot Inquiry and promises to enshrine in law the modern-day convention of Prime Ministers seeking Parliamentary ascent for overseas military action. The manifesto also references specific issues within foreign policy, such as the ongoing issues over the Chagos Islands, and the imprisonment of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

The most striking feature of the manifesto though is not the detail, but the tone. For the Labour party, foreign policy needs to move in a more measured, more ethically driven direction, perhaps accidentally reminding readers of the early years of the Blair government. Hot heads will be replaced by measured negotiation and a desire to resolve long-standing conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict or an investigation into the impact of British colonialism. These are certainly lofty aims, and few would disagree that negotiation and a cool-head are important in international affairs, but what is the cost of this? Banning arms sales to Saudi Arabia because of concerns over their actions in Yemen may be morally justifiable, but what is the economic impact for the UK? Arms sales, while unpalatable, are a profitable industry and many individuals within the UK make their living working in this industry. How do you sell a globally moral stance if it has economic consequences for those who you are representing?

While foreign policy may not be a particular vote winner for either the Labour or Conservative party, the next occupant of number ten will affect the foreign policy aims and processes of the UK. A Conservative victory means that foreign policy continues on in a familiar way, with the unknown impacts of Brexit looming on the horizon. Were the Labour party to win, or be in a coalition of some kind, foreign policy making as we know it would have changed extensively. However, as has been seen before, good deeds and kind words do not necessarily lead to a change in the harsh realities of the world. For both parties, their aims will almost certainly be over-written by their immediate international needs, making the manifesto pledges impractical.



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Post-Brexit 'Global Britain' as the theatre of the New Cold War



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One of the central tenets of the Leave campaign in 2016 and of Boris Johnson's campaign in 2019 was the idea of 'Global Britain': a prosperous, extrovert, sovereign country that has taken back control of its laws and borders, quickly doing beneficial trade deals with the world, away from the regulatory shackles of the EU. The reality, as we are about to discover, is slightly more complicated and this election campaign serves as a warning.

The reality is that Britain is already facing major challenges to its security and sovereignty – not from the European Union, but from Russia and China. Both countries, each for their own reasons and in their own ways, are engaging in separate massive campaigns of strategic expansion, influence and penetration in the domestic systems of western liberal democracies, the Middle East and – in the case of China – Africa, the Pacific and the Americas, too. The evidence that this is already happening in the UK, too is vast, sustained and public: from daily cyber attacks (against infrastructure, academia, industry and government targets) and assassinations in UK soil (such as the Salisbury chemical attack) to complex hybrid war operations (including disinformation campaigns) and the cultivation of networks of agents and informants within UK communities – including universities.

We know that Russian activists tried to assist the break-up of the UK during the 2015 referendum on Scottish independence – and when they failed, they orchestrated a disinformation campaign to discredit the referendum itself. We know that the Leave campaign was supported by Russian bots and by a conglomerate of shadowy economic and political interest groups associated with the Kremlin, Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 Trump campaign.

The Russian government would have probably been happy regardless of the outcome of the UK election. As revealed in the report on illicit Russian activities in Britain by the cross-party intelligence and security select committee (ISC), which the government tried to suppress, several Russian oligarchs – some associated with Vladimir Putin himself – have donated large amounts to the Conservative Party and are socially associated with the prime minister. Such reports are not new; evidence of Russian cash flows into the party's coffers has been public for years. Labour's lacklustre support of the government's counter-measures after Salisbury aided the Russian government's misinformation campaign, which fabricated and promoted more than 30 different theories about who was responsible so as to sow confusion and cynicism towards the UK authorities.

As for China, the new government will now have to make a decision on whether to allow Huawei into the UK's 5G network – a move that would have massive security implications. Other countries have already banned or are considering

banning Huawei from using their networking equipment, while evidence has emerged of the Chinese government putting pressure on foreign governments to approve 5G network agreements with the company.

In 2016, the Chief of the MI6, Sir Alex Younger, warned that attempts to subvert democracy by countries such as Russia “pose a fundamental threat to British sovereignty”. The UK may be taking its laws and borders back from the European Union, but it is also stepping outside of the only reliably liberal and democratic supranational structure in the world. Britain will now have to fulfil its 'global mission' alone; working with a notoriously unreliable US administration (itself going into an impeachment trial and an election year); with two nuclear superpowers carefully placing their chips around the globe; and with its domestic political and technological infrastructures under the influence of those same foreign actors and, in the case of social media, murky private interests.

Rather than emerging as a sovereign beacon – a politically correct neo-colonial power for the woke 21st century – Britain may find its own domestic sovereignty colonised as a theatre of the New Cold War. This New Cold War may be different to the old one; its aims, risks, costs, weapons, victims and endgame are still unclear, invisible and fragmented. However, the core concept of deterrence – of setting credible red lines – is still applicable. All this may be happening simply because we are allowing it to happen.

The Rorschach election: how the US narrates UK politics

As Brits went to the polls, Americans watched anxiously from overseas, divining harbingers of their own pivotal elections nearly eleven months out. Ballots were barely tallied when the ideological work of projecting preferred narratives onto election results launched into full gear.

Unsurprisingly, one of the most prominent analyses to emerge—especially among mainstream media pundits and right-leaning democrats—was that the Corbyn-led Labour Party had received its due comeuppance for moving too far left. Spelling bad news for Sanders, Warren, and their supporters, such analyses suggest that Americans should heed the obvious lessons of this cautionary tale and move quickly to the center—or otherwise assure four more years of Trump's disastrous presidency.

Seen as a boon for Biden and like-minded centrists, this story warms the hearts of status quo-defenders. According to their construction, wildly utopian aims like universal healthcare and free college is the height of folly. But alas, this analysis crumbles under scrutiny, with precious little evidence backing it up.

First of all, the Labour Manifesto's socialist proposals—from nationalizing broadband to renationalizing the railways—were clearly popular and not the main reason for Corbyn's defeat. Polling data has consistently shown a strong British majority supporting plans such as nationalizing gas, water, and transportation services. Indeed, support for public ownership of major utilities, postal services, and buses actually increased since 2017. Likewise, protecting nationalized healthcare, taxing the wealthy, and advancing a Green New Deal remained decidedly popular goals—precisely the kind of political program advocated by Sanders and fellow leftists.

Furthermore, it must be said, Sanders is no Corbyn. Although specious charges of anti-Semitism have begun in earnest, it is difficult to imagine that any candidate, no matter how much character smearing they receive, will plummet to such low approval in a contest with Trump. Indeed, Sanders has consistently polled as one of the most popular politicians in America.

But perhaps the biggest reason why this parallel does not hold up is simply because America lacks the comet-like spectacle of Brexit, which dominated the UK political landscape and transfixed public attention for months, forcing Labour into a hopelessly compromised position. Nothing like Brexit exists in the US, and this idiosyncrasy alone confounds most parallels.

Where there are parallels between the two countries is a vibrant youth activism among a new generation that is no longer in thrall to market fundamentalism, a failed neoliberal project in desperate need of economic policy interventions, and a media establishment that is generally hostile toward significant structural change. For these

reasons and more, the new American Left should not be deterred by the UK election, but there are still lessons to be learned.

In particular, Sanders and Warren supporters should prepare for an onslaught of negative coverage as major media (and threatened corporate interests) align against them. As documented by scholars and analysts, systemic media bias was a mainstay leading up to the UK election. In reflecting on his defeat, Corbyn warned: "Anyone who stands up for real change will be met by the full force of media opposition." In combating such bias—as well as the mis/disinformation originating elsewhere but amplified by mainstream media institutions—he recommended a "more robust strategy to meet this billionaire-owned and influenced hostility head-on."

While communication scholars have long quibbled over the nature of media effects, it is generally accepted that major news institutions play an important role in setting discursive agendas and framing political debates, especially during election seasons. Therefore media discourse is a crucial terrain of struggle, and one for which American leftists must be ready despite the extreme commercialism and ideological paradigms working against them. Strong media opposition to Sanders is already evident in the US (as it was in the 2016 election), but will likely get much worse.

Ultimately, while Americans are right to closely examine the contours of the recent UK elections and recognize significant similarities and lessons, Corbyn's loss by no means dampens the prospects of a rising progressivism within the American polity. Successful progressive campaigns in the US someday might even help boost those in the UK.



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If everyone has a mandate... surely nobody has a mandate?



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In his victory statement to the media, Boris Johnson asserted that, "...we will get Brexit done... delivering on the democratic mandate of the people" (Source: BBC news online). Surrounding Boris during his victory statement, the Conservatives proclaimed in logos that they were 'The People's Government'. Later the same day, Boris's media message from Number 10 had strengthened to "an overwhelming mandate from this election to get Brexit done" (Source: BBC news online). With 365 seats out of 650 the Conservatives had captured 56% of the seats. Presumably 'The People', who had voted 52% in favour of Brexit, were now 56% in favour of the 'get Brexit done' Conservative Party. However, the mandate for Brexit derived from 37.4% of the total electorate voting for leave in 2016, and the mandate for the Conservatives in 2019 was even worse at 29.3% of the total electorate. Moreover, the EURef2 poll of polls (source: whattheukthinks.org) suggests that average support for Brexit (2016 to 2019) is 53% remain versus 47% leave. So where is the mandate from 'The People'?

It is not only the Conservatives who are claiming a mandate from their seat total, the SNP won 48 out of 59 seats (81%) in Scotland and so claim that they have a very clear mandate for a second independence referendum. In her victory statement, Nicola Sturgeon asserted that, "the stunning election win last night for the SNP renews, reinforces and strengthens the mandate we have from previous elections to offer the people of Scotland a choice over their future. That mandate says that it is for the Scottish Parliament, not a Westminster government, to decide whether and when there should be a new referendum on independence" (Source: BBC news online). In turn, this re-energised SNP supporters on Twitter and calls for an indyref2 are trending once again. However, only 30.6% of the total Scottish electorate voted for the SNP.

Of course, it might all seem a little disingenuous to be focusing upon measures pertaining to the total electorate and not total voters. But, even if we focus on votes, the Conservatives still got a minority of the votes in the UK (43.6%) and the SNP still got a minority of the votes in Scotland (45%). The SNP also picked up some tactical votes as most of the tactical voting sites recommended voting SNP to block the Conservatives and Brexit, so support for the SNP and/or independence may even be over-stated a little - albeit 46% of the vote (SNP 45% + Greens 1%) looks about right given the indyref poll averages).

Conversely, the unionist parties in Scotland could also be claiming a mandate as although they lost the lion's share of seats to the SNP, combining their vote totals (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Brexit Party), they got 54% of the vote compared to 46% of the vote for the SNP and

the Greens. Meanwhile, in Wales, Labour took the most seats (22 out of 40) and the 2016 Welsh mandate for Brexit looks to have slipped as both the Conservatives and Brexit Party could only muster 41.6% of the vote. That said, support for the Conservatives in Wales increased in both vote share and seat share (up six seats to 14).

The Liberal Democrats can even claim two mandates. Not only are the majority of people now not in favour of Brexit (EURef2 poll of polls noted above), but in Scotland, the majority of people were not in favour of Brexit (62% voted to remain in 2016) and were not (and are not on average) in favour of Scottish Independence (55% voted to remain in the UK in 2014).

Meanwhile, online many of the public seem to use the party colours of the constituency winners on the electoral map to illustrate what a mandate is. The UK looks nearly all blue and Scotland looks nearly all yellow. What the press statements and social media comments tell us is that there is going to be an almighty battle in the coming months and years over who has a 'mandate' and who are 'The People'. This argument is also likely to rage between the British government and the SNP, each with their own justification of their mandate. The government will argue the SNP lack a mandate while claiming one themselves, this will be countered by the SNP claiming the Conservative have no mandate in Scotland. Thus the battle over mandates could become one of the most contentious issues for 2020.

The climate election that wasn't

For the Green Party and the wider green movement, this was billed as the climate election. The climate chaos that scientists and environmentalists had been warning us about for over thirty years was relentlessly dramatised in the news in November and December 2019. The election campaign began against a montage of burning forest in Brazil, ferocious wildfires in California and Australia and the flooding of Venice and its many iconic landmarks at an estimated cost of 1 billion euros. The flooding of Venice Council occurred just minutes after its right-wing majority rejected measures to fight climate change. The image of the regional council debating chamber, located on the Gran Canal, submerged in water on the 12th November, served as a striking metaphor of the inaction of politicians around the world on this issue, a failure that would be repeated on a global scale at Cop 25 in Madrid in December. For Boris Johnson, perhaps the most dangerous moment in the election campaign came on November 13th when he was taken to task by locals in Yorkshire, angered by his slow response to their plight. Had Britain suffered more severe flooding in the weeks that followed Johnson's heckling in Doncaster, the climate crisis might have made a more significant impact on the debates, but Brexit and the NHS almost completely dominated the headlines until election day.

In fact, the best hope for putting global warming back on the national agenda came on the 28th November when Channel 4's Krishnan Guru-Murthy hosted a lively one-hour debate on the climate crisis which all the major party leaders attended, except Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. The studio replaced the no-show politicians with melting ice sculptures of the earth mounted on the Brexit and Conservative Party emblems, which dripped quietly beneath the studio lights. The Conservative Party's response to what it called a "provocative partisan stunt" was to threaten to review Channel 4's public service broadcasting licence over a "pattern of bias" and to make an official complaint to Ofcom, which the broadcasting regulator rejected a few days later. Aside from accusations of Trump-like bullying by Channel 4 and others, Boris Johnson was criticised for dodging the climate debate by Sir David Attenborough, who told Channel 4: "I don't know what else he had to do, but it would have to be very, very important to dodge this one."

Boris Johnson's failure to attend the debate was symptomatic of a campaign where the party leader appeared to be evading scrutiny – hiding in a fridge from a Good Morning Britain interview and called out by Andrew Neil for refusing to be interviewed. But aside from the Channel 4 debate, climate change played a relatively minor role in the election – featuring in a Question Time election special with an audience of under-30s – but otherwise making

little or no impact on the leaders' debates and with no questions at all on the subject in the final leaders' debate. This, despite YouGov polls showing the environment tied with the economy as one of the top four issues facing the country, behind crime, health and leaving the EU.

The Labour Party had stolen some of the Green Party's thunder on its radical plans for a Green New Deal and was, controversially, judged to offer the greenest plans according to Friends of the Earth. The Green Party certainly saw some of its support drain away to Labour and disputes break out in the Party on the wisdom of their electoral pact with the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru not to stand against each other in some seats, while challenging Labour candidates in marginal constituencies such as Stroud. There, sitting MEP Molly Scott Cato took enough votes to deprive Labour candidate David Drew of a majority and was heckled at her concession speech on election night for allowing the Conservative candidate Siobhan Baillie to take the seat. Scott Cato argued that the Labour Party needed to "respect democracy and the voters' choice" and there was criticism of Labour for not joining in a 'defeat Boris' pact. After the election night landslide results were announced for the Conservative Party, the Greens released an infographic showing that, under proportional representation, Labour would be leading a coalition government with the support of 18 Green MPs. There was also frustration with the first-past-the-post system that despite the Green vote increasing by over 60% (at 850,000 votes) the party still only had one Green MP, Caroline Lucas. The realities of Britain's electoral system are likely to mean that Greens are massively under-represented in British Parliament compared to their European counterparts and that real action on the climate emergency, including a Green New Deal, may simply come too late.



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Is this a climate election (yet)?



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The short answer might seem to be, “No,” as we parse the psephology. However, there is a significant generational divide.

The Conservative Party devoted just two and a half pages of its manifesto to environmental concerns; “Stewards of Our Environment” (p43) “Animal Welfare” (p54) and “Fight Climate Change and Protect the Environment” (p55). On the other hand, the first section in the Labour Party manifesto was titled, “A Green Industrial Revolution” (pp9-25) promising to radically transform the economy in a “greener” direction.

The Conservatives did announce they were “banning” (perhaps “pausing”) the deeply unpopular natural gas extraction process of fracking, ahead of the election. They also promised not to make changes to the Hunting Act (2004), following the unpopularity of Theresa May’s 2017 pre-election promise to allow a free vote to overturn the ban on foxhunting.

According to the environmental campaigning group Friends of the Earth, in their assessment of the 2019 manifestos, which they scored in ten policy areas (Climate Change, Surface Transport, Aviation, Energy, Homes, Food, Farming and Land-Use, Nature, Local Authorities, Brexit, Rights and Democracy) Labour scored best (33), the Greens second (31), the Liberal Democrats third (30) and the Conservatives significantly lower (5.5):

The Conservatives may have won, despite lower environmental commitments than other parties (with the exception of the Brexit Party) however, the election campaign did signal, in a number of ways, that environmental concerns now have a higher public profile than in previous elections. Pre-election data from YouGov (2019) suggested that for 18-29 year old voters, the second most important issue facing the country, after Brexit, was the environment. According to Lord Ashcroft’s post-election polling, Labour won more than half the votes of 18-24 year olds (57%) and 25-34 year olds (55%). Thousands in Britain have taken part in the, growing, global School Strike for Climate movement inspired by Greta Thunberg, and thousands more in Extinction Rebellion, in the two years since the 2017 election. By 2024 (the next election date under the Fixed Term Parliaments’ Act) many of those younger participants will also be of voting age.

There were new developments in media coverage of the environment as an election issue. Channel 4 hosted the, “World’s first party leaders’ debate on the climate” (28 Nov 2019). Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Jeremy Corbyn (Labour), Jo Swinson (Liberal Democrats), Sian Berry (Green Party co-leader) and Adam Price (Plaid Cymru) all took part. Boris Johnson for the Conservatives and Nigel Farage for the Brexit Party chose not to attend, their parties symbolically replaced by melting ice-sculptures of the planet. This led to a

Conservative complaint to Ofcom, which was not upheld. The BBC’s “Under 30s” Question Time special included a segment of questions on the environment, including climate mitigation and meat consumption. And the BBC Sounds election show, “This Matters”, aimed at younger listeners, included an episode titled “Is this the climate election?”

The Green Party of England and Wales increased their vote share (from approx. 500,000, or 2.1% in 2017, to approx. 870,000, or 2.7% in 2019), but, thanks to first past the post, remained static with one MP, Caroline Lucas. Both Lucas and Sian Berry were impressive media performers for the Greens. However, Jonathan Bartley (co-leader) was forced to apologise after a BBC North West television interview, in which he appeared to single out halal meat for a putative ban, prompting a dismayed reaction from Muslim communities, and solidarity from Jewish ones. That incident exemplifies future challenges for those campaigning on environmental issues, inside and outside party politics; to be vigilant about eco-fascist tendencies (witting and unwitting). Xenophobic and/or racist environmental nationalism is already experiencing a resurgence, exemplified by the (alleged – as he is awaiting trial) Christchurch mosque terrorist’s self-identified “eco-fascist” manifesto (2019). This ideology has the potential to become attractive to certain populations, as global climate impacts become more evidently catastrophic.

While the 2019 general election was taking place, so was the yearly United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Madrid. With Greta Thunberg and other youth protesters outside, it had to go to extra time. The final concordat, reported by *The Economist*, “...agreed on only weak and watered-down commitments to the drastic cuts in emissions of greenhouse gases that had been promised. And a decision on regulations for new international carbon markets was deferred until next year.”

The latest climate models, generated for use in the United Nations’ next major report (due to be published in 2021) suggest that the planet is presently on course for 5 degrees of warming by the end of the century. This would be catastrophic for billions of people, in terms of food, land and health security.

2019 may not have been a climate election for a majority of voters, yet. But as the century progresses, there’s little doubt that future elections will be.

Movement-led electoral communication: Extinction Rebellion and party policy in the media

In recent years, UK social movements have become more actively engaged in electoral political communication. In the 2015 and 2017 general election campaigns, The People's Assembly Against Austerity adopted novel strategies to try to enter into the political debate and reach the wider electorate. During the short campaigning periods, the movement published podcasts, crowdfunded anti-Conservative billboards and brought back the protest song with the number one hit *Liar Liar* GE2017, as well as maintaining an active presence online and launching successful hashtag campaigns such as #ManifestoOfMisery on Twitter. The purview of each of these tactics was the electorate and the content sought to negatively evaluate the incumbent government and austerity policy in general.

In 2019, Extinction Rebellion (XR) employed similar communicative tactics (producing a billboard, releasing hashtags, a protest song, and an election special podcast) but with voters citing the environment as one of the top four issues facing the country, XR's communicative tactics focused on prospective parliamentary candidates (PPC). One such example was the Climate hustings held by local XR groups in their constituencies, each aimed at securing support from PPCs for the movement's *Three Demands Bill* that called for the next Government to "declare an emergency, commit to zero emissions by 2025 and create a Citizens' Assembly to set out how we achieve this."

Alongside these hustings, XR performed a series of non-violent direct actions (NVDA) directed at the political parties, the majority of which featured during their '12 Days of Crisis' campaign. From 30th November until 11th December activists sounded air raid sirens across the rocks of Hay Tor at dawn, paraded a four metre ostrich with its head in the sand between political party headquarters in London, and were joined by the actor Emma Thompson outside BBC's broadcasting house to deliver a mock weather forecast. Unusually for social movement action during elections, a number of these tactics were reported in the mainstream print media and linked, therein, with policy proposals from the main parties. The reporting of XR's protest repertoires throughout the year could account for this increased attention.

In this short analysis, I will focus on the most broadly reported action (across the red tops, mid-market and broadsheets) dubbed 'Bee-yond Politics', to demonstrate links made between movement action and policy reporting. On the 5th Day of Crisis, several activists dressed in yellow-and-black bee outfits glued themselves to the Liberal Democrat battle bus. Later that week 'the bees' found the Labour bus and on the 10th Day the Conservative one, all with the intention of focusing the parties attention on the Bill. Across the newspapers, there was no media reporting at

all of activists gluing themselves to Labour's bus, rather the focus was on the Liberal Democrat and Conservative buses and concomitant policy. The two red tops analysed here reported on the events in markedly different ways, with *The Sun* codifying the activists negatively, branding them as "leftie clowns", while *The Mirror* stuck with puns about bees to describe them ("a swarm" of activists "buzzed around"). Both papers report on XR's *Three Demands Bill*, but only *The Mirror* reported the voices of the activists and alluded to specific environmental proposals (the Liberal Democrat's 2045 emissions reduction target and the Conservative's elusive plans). The mid-market *MailOnline* also described activists as "bumbling" and gives the rationale behind XR's action, but, perhaps surprisingly, foregrounded activist voices most prominently in its reporting of the Conservative battle bus. XR's warning of Conservative party 2050 decarbonisation policy as a "death sentence" is given in the first sentence and around two thirds of the article expands on this view. This distinction in reporting is also found in two broadsheets. Both *The Independent* and *The Guardian* report extensively on the reasons for activists gluing themselves to the Liberal Democrat battle bus and link the action with the party's policy to reduce carbon emissions, but when reporting on the Conservative battle bus mention only its delayed departure and limited police action, and make no reference to the party's environmental commitments.

The inconsistent linking of XR action and policy in the small sample here was reflected in overall media reporting of the environment in this election. As Loughborough University analysis reveals, coverage of the environment remained low and the issue did not appear in the top five themes across the media sector, which is somewhat surprising given that data showed voters were concerned with the environment and, therefore, the potential electoral salience of this issue. But with Brexit dominating and XR's strategy of circumventing voter-communication in favour of targeting parliamentary candidates and battle buses, the shift in this election from voter-focused anti-policy (austerity) communication to that of party political pro-policy (environment) messaging may have proven ineffectual at ensuring 2019 became the climate election.



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The digital
campaign

Digital campaign regulation: more urgent than ever?

This General Election has shown digital campaigning to be the 'wild west' of politics, revealing the extent to which electoral law has not adapted. Looking at transparency and veracity, we discuss the need for urgent change.

Transparency: Who is Campaigning Online?

Transparency is a key principle of electoral law, the Electoral Commission argue that voters should be able to understand 'who is behind the campaign and who created it'. However, at the moment, there are no rules compelling political actors to disclose who they are online. Whilst offline campaigners need to include 'imprints' on campaigning material, online you are not required to declare who you are.

Although campaigners' identity can remain unclear in the offline world, the high costs of campaigning mean that few actors get involved and they are often relatively easily identified. However, online a diverse range of individuals can get involved with relatively little effort (and money), resulting in a more crowded and unfamiliar campaigning landscape. The only official information provided about these actors comes from a requirement for parties and 'non-party' campaigners to register with the Electoral Commission if they plan to spend over £20,000 in England and £10,000 in the rest of the UK.

Looking at the most recent records, we can see that these thresholds mean only a small number of actors register. Indeed, just 69 groups or individuals are on the Commission's register of 'non-party' campaigners. Whilst providing data about some actors such as 'We Own It' and '3rd Party Ltd', this fails to capture the range of groups revealed as active through Facebook's advertising archive. This (somewhat unreliable) resource, has shown the rise of third party campaigners, but we have little information about who these actors are, whether campaigns are co-ordinated, or where funding comes from.

If voters ought to be able to know 'who is behind the campaign and who created it' then there is an urgent need to visit the information collected and disclosed about those active in campaigns. This should involve introducing digital imprints, reducing spending thresholds for Electoral Commission registration, and encouraging reliable industry-led transparency initiatives.

Veracity

In addition to highlighting the need to update existing electoral regulations, the General Election has also shown the need to consider the case for new regulation, particularly around ensuring veracity. A desire for truth - and a perception that politicians might not hold that same desire - at elections is clearly not new. The rise in digital campaigning has shone a further light on

misinformation and the need to consider what regulation in this area might look like.

Parties across the spectrum have been accused of spreading false information online and offline, from the Conservative Party's doctoring of interview footage, to Liberal Democrat barcharts and Labour photoshopping, parties (and others) have been accused of issuing false information. Whilst being creative with the truth is not a new political development, at this election online technology has been used to further promote these ends...

From a regulatory perspective, these examples fall outside the purview of existing oversight. At present, the content of online material is not subject to regulatory scrutiny, although there is some precedent for factual claims to be checked in advertising. Companies, have also shied away from regulating political content, with Mark Zuckerberg deciding to promote 'free expression'. There is also evidence that platform algorithms can promote provocative or untrue content due to the engagement it promotes.

The debate over whether and how to promote political veracity brings a new dimension to calls for increased digital regulation. Whilst it is by no means simple for regulators to become arbiters of political truth, at present power is being given to companies to determine what it is that voters do or do not see. This raises questions about whether we want to contract out fundamental democratic principles to third parties and companies who have unclear (or contradictory) conceptions of a 'good' society.

Whilst it may therefore be challenging, this election illustrates the case for pursuing regulation of content or, at the least, providing frameworks and guidance for how campaigners, platforms and actors are able to promote this material to voters. This could involve compelling platforms to provide balanced coverage, pursuing algorithmic transparency and implementing protocols to prevent extreme and reactionary material being promoted on platforms.

Conclusion

The General Election has shown that electoral oversight principles are not being upheld online, and that there may be a case for new regulations. It remains to be seen, however, whether politicians will act on these most recent concerns and implement new legislation of the form we urgently need.



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Did the Conservatives embrace social media in 2019?



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It has now become almost trite to point out that the political conversation on social media is not representative of the public at large. For many people this was brought into sharp focus on the day after the election, as the scale of the Conservative victory seemed to be at odds with the mood online. Social media, then, isn't a great way to take the temperature of the nation—but we should not lose sight of the fact that it is nonetheless seen as a useful way for parties to communicate with certain sections of the public.

That's why social media was a key part of Labour's election campaign in 2017. They posted more content, uploaded more videos, and generated more interactions than any of the other main parties. This didn't necessarily translate into a meaningful increase in support for Labour, but when the Conservatives hired Sean Topham and Ben Guerin—two twenty-something consultants from New Zealand that worked on the successful Morrison campaign in Australia—it was taken as a sign that they would be taking social media seriously this time around.

So, did the Conservatives use social media differently in the 2019 General Election campaign? To explore this, I've used CrowdTangle—an online tool that allows users to monitor the output of Facebook pages—to access data about the output of the official pages of seven parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP, Green, UKIP, and the Brexit Party) in the last three election campaigns. I've focussed on Facebook because it is regularly used by over two-thirds (67%) of the online population—making it the most widely-used social network in the UK.

The data show that the Conservatives massively increased their Facebook output in 2019 (see Figure 1). In the 2017 campaign they made an average of around 3 Facebook posts per day, but this rose to nearly 21 in 2019. Labour also increased their output slightly, from an already-high figure of around 12 Facebook posts per day in 2017, to nearly 18 per day two years later. The number of posts from both parties increased steadily over the course of the campaign, and surged in the final week, when the Conservatives averaged around 29 posts per day and Labour around 33.

The data in Figure 1 also suggest that the Liberal Democrats may also have changed their strategy in 2019, more than doubling their number of posts per day from around 4 to 10. The Brexit Party were close behind with around 9 posts per day (shown as a dashed line in Figure 1 because they did not exist in 2017), ahead of the SNP, Greens and UKIP, who all appear to have stuck with the same basic approach as last time.

However, even though the Conservatives pushed out more Facebook content than Labour during the campaign, this did not translate into

more interactions (engagement with the content measured through the number of likes, comments, shares, etc). The Conservatives averaged around 74,000 interactions per day compared to Labour's 80,000. This could be to do with the fact that both Labour voters and Facebook users tend to be younger—though it may simply be that the content from Labour was more engaging.

Video, which Labour utilised considerably more than the other parties in 2017, seems to have been less of a priority for them in 2019. In 2017, Labour made around 9 video posts per day, but this fell to around 5.5 in 2019. The amount of video from the Conservatives increased, but fell as a proportion of all posts. This may reflect the fact that video is no longer seen as a way to game the Facebook algorithm and springboard posts to the top of people's news feeds.

Facebook is just one network, and, of course, posts are just one way for parties to communicate with social media users. Much attention will be focussed on the use of paid political advertising on social media in the coming months. And regardless of the format, it's the message that is important. But it is clear that the two largest parties increasingly see social media as a way of getting their message across.

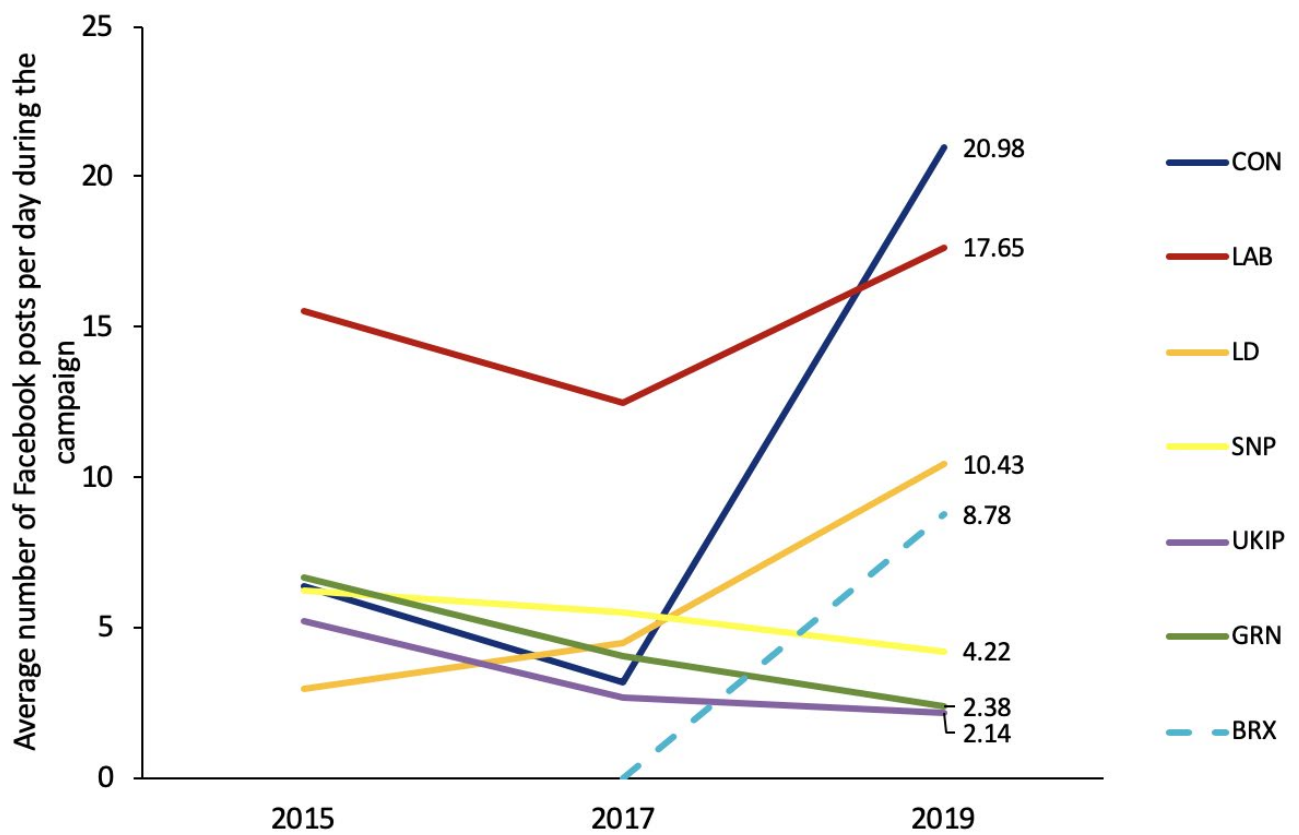


Figure 1. Average number of Facebook posts per day by the main parties during the last three UK General Election campaigns

#GE2019 – Labour owns the Tories on Instagram, the latest digital battlefield



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Jeremy Corbyn may have been unable to lead the Labour party to victory on polling day but during the campaign there was one place he was undisputed victor – Instagram. The Labour leader saw a significant increase in followers (Table 1), as did Labour's official party account. All the parties' and leaders' accounts increased their followers across the course of the campaign. But it is striking that while Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn started at a similar level, as the election progressed, far more Instagram users decided to follow Jeremy Corbyn's account than that of his main rival.

As demonstrated in figure 1, by mid-November Jeremy Corbyn's account began to pull strongly ahead. Interestingly, both Corbyn and the Labour party accounts also saw a strong uptick in users in the last few days of the campaign, perhaps reflecting the received wisdom that voters don't take a strong interest until close to the election date.

The dramatic increase in followers is important for several reasons.

Instagram appeals to a younger demographic than Facebook or Twitter. There are around 23,900,000 UK users of Instagram, 74% of them are aged between 18 and 44. That's a key demographic Labour hoped to energise and encourage to vote. This is because in the 2017 General Election, voters younger than 47 were more likely to vote Labour than Conservative.

The increase was also important because it echoed a similar rise in social media followers for Corbyn in the 2017 campaign. Then, he was able to increase the number of followers of his Facebook account by more than a third, the Labour party increased its followers by more than 75%.

Part of Labour's digital strategy was to encourage people to back it who have not traditionally voted for the party. On Instagram, it repeatedly ran posts encouraging young people to register to vote, including this one featuring the TV presenter, Billie JD Porter.

The desire to motivate Millennial and older Gen Z voters explains the party's concerted campaign to target them. An analysis of activity on both parties and leaders' Instagram accounts, demonstrates that Labour posted more than its rivals. This pattern of activity was accentuated on the party leader accounts. Corbyn's account was by far the most prolific, far outstripping his rivals. Indeed, on polling day alone it posted 53 times.

Corbyn's account posted a range of content. Among the blizzard of posts were real-life case studies of people affected by austerity, exhortations to register to vote or get out and vote, celebrity endorsements, and screenshots of Twitter statements aimed at firing up his supporters. And true to the cliché of Instagram users' interests there were also animal pictures, including this one of his cat, El Gato.

The Labour party not only produced the most content, it generated the most engagement too. An analysis of the most watched videos demonstrates content produced by Corbyn and Labour vastly outperformed those of other parties. Almost all this engagement came from Corbyn's account. It delivered the vast bulk of Labour's video views, 8,161,500 compared to just 1,537,000 from the party's official account. Videos that cut through with social media users were those that emphasised Corbyn's down-to-earth personality, or used emotional messaging to drive engagement, such as this video message about her experience of the NHS made by a young woman with cancer.

Other posts that performed well were videos that accused Johnson of being a liar, a coward or a racist. By far the most watched video was posted on the final day of the campaign. Titled "If you're not sure who to vote for, watch this", it was a collection of news clips showing the impact of inequality, poverty and austerity, interspersed with interviews with Conservative politicians and a speech by Boris Johnson, all edited to promote the impression that the Tory politicians were cold and uncaring.

Videos posted by Corbyn dominated the most-watched list. While the leader accounts were more successful than anonymous party accounts at generating engagement, Johnson's struggled to get anywhere near the level of views that Corbyn's achieved (Table 2). Johnson's most watched video was of him laying bricks at a new housing development in Bedfordshire, viewed 98,700 times, putting it well outside the top-10 most viewed videos.

Given Instagram's demographic, it was clear Johnson's digital team were not prioritising it to the same extent as Corbyn's. Clearly, Labour and Corbyn used Instagram to reach younger voters, easily out-performing other parties. What is less clear is whether they only reached those already intending to vote Labour or users who might be persuaded to back the party. But given Labour's performance on polling day, it is clear future social media campaigns will need to demonstrate persuasive impact in delivering voters as well as online engagement.

Table 1 - Increase in Instagram followers during campaign

Name	Followers on 29/10/19	Followers on 12/12/19	Change figure +	Change % +
Jeremy Corbyn	261,704	443,261	181,557	69.37%
Labour	79,661	167,682	88,021	110.49%
Boris Johnson	242,672	292,771	50,099	20.64%
Conservatives	75,080	107,515	32,435	43.20%
Green Party	22,867	34,778	11,911	52.09%
Liberal Democrats	21,565	31,361	9,796	45.43%
Nicola Sturgeon	20,588	26,817	6,229	30.26%
Brexit Party	44,700	50,802	6,102	13.65%
Jo Swinson	11,359	17,071	5,712	50.29%
Nigel Farage	94,800	100,492	5,692	6.00%
SNP	24,727	30,097	5,370	21.72%
Adam Price*	0	1,398	1,398	N/A
Plaid Cymru	4,475	5,421	946	21.14%
Jonathan Bartley	1,483	2,381	898	60.55%
Sian Berry	611	641	30	4.91%

*Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price opened a new Instagram account during the campaign.

Table 2 - Top 10 most viewed Instagram videos during the campaign

	Account	Theme	Views
1	Jeremy Corbyn	If you're not sure who to vote for..	486,657
2	Jeremy Corbyn	Jeremy Corbyn voting	221,000
3	Jeremy Corbyn	Joe Pike's tweet on child at Leeds hospital	204,545
4	Jeremy Corbyn	Boris Johnson's words	202,000
5	Jeremy Corbyn	Jeremy Corbyn drinking a tea	182,400
6	Jeremy Corbyn	We're ready for it short clip	176,067
7	Jeremy Corbyn	Jeremy Corbyn reading mean tweets	155,098
8	Jeremy Corbyn	Dr speaking on a Tube train UGC	139,256
9	Jeremy Corbyn	Andrew Neil calls Boris Johnson out	130,337
10	Jeremy Corbyn	Jeremy Corbyn at the barbers	130,296

Figure 2: Total Instagram posts in campaign, n=716

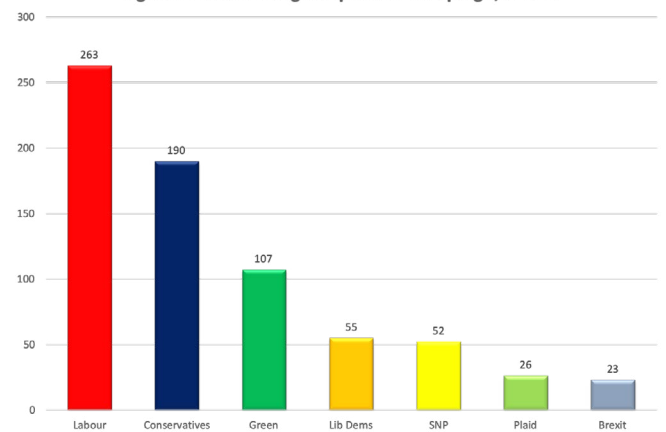


Figure 3: Total Instagram posts by leaders in campaign, n=679

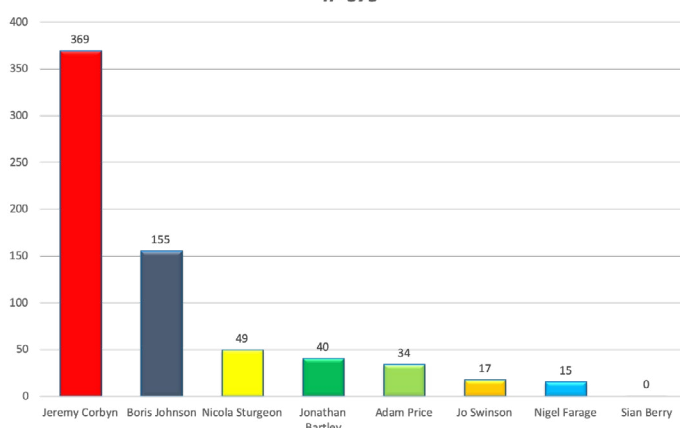
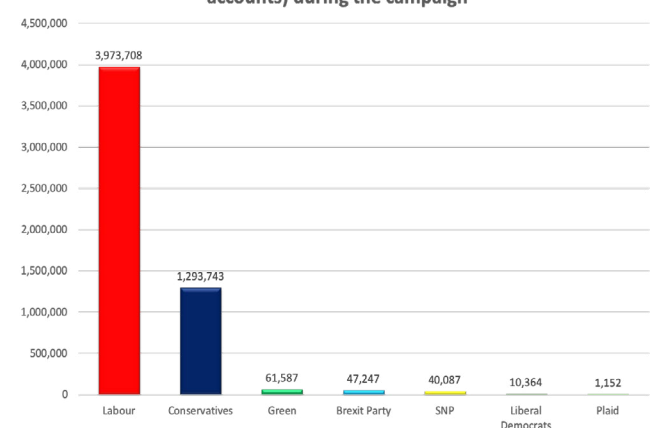


Figure 4: Instagram video views (combined party and leader accounts) during the campaign



Spot the difference: how Nicola Sturgeon and Jo Swinson self-represented on Twitter



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There is no doubt that the results of the general elections came as a shock to many across the UK, not least to Jo Swinson. As leader of the Liberal Democrats, she not only lost her seat but consequently had to step down as the party's leader. For someone who had said she will be the next Prime Minister when she was first elected, it was telling that she could not even convince her own constituency to vote for her. Compare that to Nicola Sturgeon, another female party leader whose party did remarkably well, gaining 13 new seats including Jo Swinson's. What made these two women leaders so different?

From my critical perspective as a gender scholar, I was interested to know why Nicola Sturgeon sparked so much confidence as a politician while Jo Swinson often left me feeling unconvinced. If the results are anything to go by, it seems that I was not the only one who felt this way. Thus, I turned to social media, specifically Twitter, to determine the sort of online political self these two women projected to the public, given that social media offer more control over content than traditional media. The understanding was that their self-representation will project the preferred political persona, and therefore be a better marker of how each woman wanted to be seen by the public. Focusing on their Twitter activity a week before and a day after the election on December 12 (5th-13th December 2019), I looked at each leader's level of visibility, the personality they projected and the level of public engagement with their tweets.

While these are preliminary reflections, the first thing to note is that Nicola Sturgeon was far more visible on Twitter than Jo Swinson. During the 9 days, she tweeted 215 times compared with Jo Swinson's 80. These comprised 25 original tweets, 22 retweets with comments and 168 retweets without comments, while Jo Swinson's were 39, 15 and 26 respectively. Thus, beyond visibility on traditional media and face-to-face campaign interactions, Nicola Sturgeon made better use of Twitter to remain visible to the public. As people often vote for candidates they are familiar with, this seemed like a good campaign strategy. However, it must also be noted that much as social media can be an alternative space for women politicians to counter-act their marginalisation in traditional media, they can also serve as an arena for the (re)production of sexist and stereotypical abuse from the public. Jo Swinson, for example, have reported of relentless online sexist abuse as have other women MPs like Diane Abbott. At the start of the campaign, 18 women MPs also stood down citing abuse as one of the key reasons. Thus, social media can be a double-edged sword to women politicians.

Considering tweet content, Nicola Sturgeon adopted a more populist approach that included a large number of endorsements from other people,

images with smiling crowds to signify her popularity and likeability, endorsements of other SNP candidates to portray herself as a supportive leader, a variety of 'ordinary' activities like ice skating and tossing vegetables to foreground her affinity with the masses, and a clear and simple campaign message: lock Boris Johnson out by voting for her party. Many of these strategies were missing in Jo Swinson's feed as she adopted a more individualised political persona that focused on her campaign message (most of which were criticisms of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn), and rarely showed her with crowds, thereby missing an opportunity to counter her (perceived) unpopularity especially in traditional media. Thus, while Nicola Sturgeon adopted a mix of aspects of her femininity, masculinised politics and ordinariness to lay claim to an authentic political self, Jo Swinson's constructed self focused too narrowly on conventional ideas about politicking, thereby leaving information gaps about who she really is and whether what she showed online was authentic.

Jo Swinson's individualised approach to her self-representation, which did not differ much from her portrayal in traditional media, may have considerably contributed to her unpopularity, which was reflected in responses to her tweets. For example, retweets above 1000 were 5 (9.3%) while likes above 2000 were 13 (24.1%), compared with Nicola Sturgeon's 12 (25.5%) and 38 (76.6%) respectively. In fact, poll results show that the more people saw Jo Swinson, the more they disliked her. The extent of Jo Swinson's unpopularity is even evident among her fellow women politicians as both Nicola Sturgeon and Diana Abbot were jubilant when they heard that she lost her seat.

Achieving an authentic political self that inspires confidence in voters is a difficult task for women politicians because politics is so masculinised. This initial analysis has shown that while social media gives women more content control, it is still very easy to get it wrong.

“Go back to your student politics”? Momentum, the digital campaign, and what comes next

The dust has barely settled on the 2019 General Election, and the post mortem on the Labour Party's lowest number of seats since 1935 has well and truly begun. Jeremy Corbyn has focused on the polarising impact of Brexit, and how the offer of a second referendum failed to resonate with Leave supporters. Research from Datapraxis and Opinium suggests that the leadership was partially to blame. Described as “unelectable”, “too old”, and “too far to the left” by voters interviewed by the *Financial Times*, Corbyn was a dealbreaker for some. Further, this unpopularity was consistently fuelled by the negative media coverage that the Labour Party received in the press.

But what about Momentum, the political activist group founded in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's rise to leader of the Labour Party? With 40,000 members, 200,000 supporters, and over 170 local groups, the organisation was described as a significant factor in the surprise result in the 2017 General Election. Momentum built upon this blueprint in 2019, focusing their efforts on three aims: (1) mobilising supporters to canvass in marginal constituencies using My Campaign Map, with access to WhatsApp groups to quickly create networks amongst local campaigners; (2) crowd-funding over £200,000 for micro-targeted adverts on social media, aimed at driving voter registration and youth turnout; (3) sharing memes and video content with an increased focus on personalisation through “Videos By The Many”, where supporters filmed and shared their own personal experiences on key policy issues.

While successful in mobilising supporters on the ground, the canvassing failed to make a difference in key marginals. Now, Momentum is at a crossroads, facing a time of re-definition. Firstly, who will they endorse in the upcoming leadership election for the Labour Party? In interviews Dennis (2019) conducted with members, there was notable frustration for not being consulted on the selection of the candidates backed by Momentum in the National Executive Committee elections in 2018. Supporters, however, were willing to overlook this in the name of a Corbyn-led government. With Corbyn due to step down imminently, the organisation faces a leadership election without him on the ballot paper. This is significant for a group whose very existence is entwined with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.

Momentum's leadership and the National Co-ordinating Group now face a choice on whether to consult supporters, risking division, or make a recommendation and instruct members to lend their support to the preferred candidate, contradicting their commitment to member-driven decision making.

A potential dividing line here is Brexit. In a consultation in November 2018, 82% of members who responded felt that “Brexit will make things

worse” and the majority supported a public vote. With the UK due to leave the EU by January 31, this may seem insignificant. The trade negotiations that follow, however, will see the question of Europe firmly in the minds of the public. As the Labour Party considers how to win back seats lost in Leave-supporting constituencies, Momentum must consider how much of a sticking point this could be when evaluating the likely frontrunners. During the campaign, both Angela Rayner and Rebecca Long-Bailey suggested they could support Leave in a hypothetical second referendum, with a Labour-negotiated deal. This could be problematic for a membership that adopts a pro-Remain position.

Secondly, Momentum needs to consider how it is perceived outside of the Labour Party. During the election night coverage on ITV, former home secretary Alan Johnson described Momentum as a “cult”, stating that its’ members should “go back to your student politics”. Further described as a “cancer” in modern politics by Iain Duncan Smith MP and a “disaster” by Nina Myskow on *Jeremy Vine* on 5, the organisation has been presented as a radical fringe with nefarious intentions in the immediate aftermath of the election. This is not new - in the past Momentum has chosen to lean into this criticism to foster the group's identity and deepen the connections between supporters.

While this is an effective form of mobilisation, this obfuscates their activism between elections. In Portsmouth, Dennis (2019) found examples of community-focused projects, such as an event commemorating the first anniversary of the 72 people killed in the Grenfell Tower fire. “The Organiser”, a monthly email digest to Momentum supporters, shares similar updates from local groups across the country: debates about the future of social housing in Manchester, training events on local democracy in Liverpool, campaigning against transphobia in Southampton. This is a far cry from the representation in post-election coverage.

Momentum's latest email to supporters calls for a period of reflection. Looking inwards, the organisation must contemplate if the narrative of “people power” can be realised. Looking outwards, it must consider how it engages with the public, and whether the mobilising benefits of its provocative communication outweigh potential reputational damage.



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Taking the tube



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Two days into the 2019 campaign, the Labour Party's Facebook event "Vote Labour for real change Thursday 12 December" had 2,600 supporters registered. Meanwhile, the Conservatives' "Back Boris on Dec 12th to get Brexit done" had 3,500 people registered. By election day, the Tories had 4,600 registered, Labour 11,000.

The major parties focused heavily upon Facebook for their online advertising strategies, placing more than 25,000 ads during the course of the campaign. But if the younger demographic is key to electoral success, strategies based on the overarching influence of Facebook (which appeals to broader age ranges) may eventually become questionable.

Ofcom reports that the entertainment platform most popular with British youth is YouTube (at an average of 73 minutes a day). As the campaign began, Labour had 30,000 YouTube subscribers, the Tories 38,000. The day of the poll, the Conservatives had increased their lead, with 47,600 subscribers against Labour's 32,300. Labour's YouTube video of its campaign launch attracted 1,200 views in two days. The Conservatives' campaign launch video drew 5,500 views in 24 hours. The only content the Labour YouTube channel posted in the last fortnight of the campaign comprised six BSL (British sign language) versions of parts of their manifesto. The Tories were still posting on election day.

The Conservatives also (successfully) offered rather more entertaining material: from slick adverts to ostensibly voter-generated content. Posted on 12 November, 'Boris Johnson's hilarious election advert' reached 193,000 views in its first week. Though far from hilarious, Johnson's celebrity appeal and the clickbait headline worked wonders. The Conservatives' chillax music video of 25 November ('lo fi boriswave beats to relax/get brexit done to') attracted more than 340,000 views in five days. A fortnight later, Boris Johnson's "funny Love Actually parody" gained 80,000 views in its first 12 hours. (This was not however uncontroversial: Labour candidate Rosena Allin-Khan claimed the Tories had stolen the idea from her own spoof video; and within hours an alternative version – in which Johnson was wooed by Donald Trump – appeared online.)

Meanwhile, it proved difficult for Labour to maintain the social media initiative it had seized in its previous campaign. Where there had been harmony, there was now discord. The demise of 2017's Grime4Corbyn movement (which had only 2,000 followers on Twitter, 1,000 on Facebook and 600 on Instagram) might not have merited the attention the BBC gave it in 2019, but, when on 12 November the Scarcity Studios YouTube channel posted a video critiquing that movement's exploitation of grime artists, it attracted more than 5,000 views in a day.

The youthful enthusiasm of 2017 seemed very far away. Playing to attention spans rather shorter than the typical electoral cycle, YouTube tends (perhaps like much of Momentum itself) to favour the disruptive characteristics of a protest movement over nuanced, complex and constructive political dialogue. Thus July 2019's harshly satirical 'Boris Bop' video, created by YouTube mash-up maestro 'Joe', gained more than a million views in four months. The same channel followed this on 25 October with Boris Johnson's 'Any Deal Will Do', attracting 300,000 views in a month. Published five days later, a John Bercow version of Electric Six's 'Danger! High Voltage' ('Order! High Voltage') drew 200,000 views in six weeks. The following day's 'Brexit Halloween with Jacob Rees-Mogg' gained 150,000 views in the same period. Posted on 12 November, a video of Nigel Farage lamenting (to the tune of Depeche Mode's 1981 anthem) that despite his attempts to promote "bigotry and hate" he "just can't get enough" electoral support attracted over 50,000 views in a week. Other YouTube channels followed suit. Cassetteboy's similarly simplistic response to the politics of the post-truth era – an edit of Boris Johnson speeches to the beat of MC Hammer's 'U Can't Touch This' ('Can't Trust Me') posted on YouTube on 5 December – gained a quarter of a million views in five days.

YouTube has rarely engaged its audiences in more serious political debates, despite attempts by establishment 'Boomers' to impose their earnestness upon the site. As 2019's campaign began, the government's YouTube video encouraging online voter registration (originally posted in 2014) was fronted by a middle-aged website manager. On 7 November, the BBC posted a spectacularly patronising video called "the voting system explained". Meanwhile, E4's celebrity-strewn video of 5 November encouraging youth to "pop [their] voting cherry" gained fewer than 3,000 views in a month – but was at least preferable to the YouTube vacillations of Russell Brand who, following his 2015 claims that revolution trumped democracy, had gone on to encourage voter registration for the 2017 poll.

The politicization of that platform won't start with established broadcasters, governments or political parties but at the grassroots. It remains to be seen whether that's a direction which YouTube's influencers and influenceds will seek to take.

The politics of deletion in social media campaigns

Influence operations and propaganda on social media emerged in the run-up to electoral events in 2016 and continue to challenge policymakers. These operations rely on coordinated and targeted attacks where the accounts and profiles sourcing the content disappear in the months following the campaign. User accounts may be suspended from social platforms for violating standards and Terms of Service, such as posting inappropriate content or displaying bot-like activity patterns; others are deleted by the malicious account holders to cover their tracks. The modus operandi of these operations often consists of amplifying original hyperpartisan content by large botnets that disappear after the campaign. The emerging thread is then picked up by high-profile partisan accounts that seed divisive rhetoric to larger networks of partisan users and automated accounts.

It is against this landscape of information warfare that political campaigns seek to influence the public opinion. Social media platforms ramped up efforts to flag false amplification, remove “fake accounts,” and prevent the use of highly optimized and targeted political messages on users. These efforts sought to clear social platforms from “low-quality content,” including user accounts, posts, and weblinks selected for removal. The removal of social media posts and accounts thus constitutes the central line of action against influence operations, misinformation, false or fabricated news items, spam, and user-generated hyperpartisan news. While social platforms rarely disclose content that was flagged for removal, some companies have released publicly the community standards used to remove content from their services.

Studying the politics of deletion on social platforms is thus an exercise in reverse engineering, as content that has been blocked from social platforms is likely to be problematic content no longer available. As such, the volume of deleted accounts and posts linked to campaigns can be used to gauge the extent to which a given election on social media was plagued by problematic content. The process of verifying if content remains available is however cumbersome. Moreover, election campaigns need to be monitored in real time, as once a post is deleted by a user or blocked by the platform it disappears from the platform altogether; similarly, deleting a tweet automatically triggers a cascade of deletions for all retweets of that tweet. This specific affordance of social platforms has of course facilitated the disappearance of posts, images, and weblinks from the public view.

The 2019 UK General Election appears to have been relatively trouble-free. On the eve of the vote, only 6.7% of election-related tweets had been removed and less than 2% of the accounts were no longer operational. This figure is in line with previous studies reporting that on average 4% of tweets disappear, but contrasts with the

referendum campaign, where 33% of the tweets leading up to the referendum vote have been removed. Only about half of the most active accounts that tweeted the referendum continue to operate publicly and 20% of all accounts are no longer active. These accounts were particularly prolific: while Twitter suspended fewer than 5% of all accounts, they posted nearly 10% of the entire conversation about the referendum. Partisan affiliation was also a good predictor of tweet decay in the referendum campaign, as we found more messages from the Leave campaign that disappeared than the entire universe of tweets affiliated with the Remain campaign.

Ephemerality is perhaps an expected affordance of social media communication, but it is not an expected design of political communication and deliberation across social platforms. Influence operation can exploit this affordance by offloading problematic content that is removed from platforms before the relentless — though time consuming — news cycle has successfully corrected the narratives championed in highly volatile social media campaigns. This amounts to the involuntary but spontaneous gaslighting of social platforms: the low persistence and high ephemerality of social media posts are leveraged to transition from one contentious and unverified political frame to the next before mechanism for checking and correcting false information are in place.

Ultimately, the politics of deletion allow for daisy-chaining multiple disinformation campaigns that disappear as soon as rectifying information or alternative stories starts to emerge.

Campaigners adopting the “Firehose of Falsehood” model can offload social media messages rapidly, repetitively, and continuously over multiple channels without commitment to consistency or accuracy. The high volume posting of social media messages can be effective because individuals are more likely to be persuaded if a story, however confusing, appears to have been reported repetitively and by multiple sources. In this context, counterpropaganda methods and the fact-checking of social media posts are particularly ineffective. On social media platforms, as it turns out, nobody will know you are a troll.



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“Behind the curtain of the targeting machine”: political parties A/B testing in action



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One of the core processes that we know has been occurring over the last decade, but have had little evidence of its action, is A/B testing. However, thanks to (albeit limited) data sources such as the Facebook Ad Library, we finally saw behind the curtain of the targeting machine and how parties are using Facebook users as a data source to experiment with different political content. A/B testing is a method of comparing two or more versions of an advert against each other to determine which one performs better. Depending on what content is used, people will interact differently. Then statistical analysis can be used to examine which variation performs better for a given goal.

All the parties are engaging in this process, however a clear example showed up during the election campaign via the Liberal Democrats. 15 different versions of Jo Swinson were sent to a combined 128,000 people early in the campaign (Image 1). This interest in testing out different Jo's shows us both the origins of their misplaced highly personalised campaign, and how A/B testing via Facebook can lead to content decisions on and offline.

All the posts featured the same message (Figure 1), and a link to the Liberal Democrat website to measure clickthroughs. The Liberal Democrats were clearly trying to find the right Jo for their campaign communications, the audience data (Graph 1) shows how the party was reaching different demographics via the different Jo's. This is because of the Facebook ad delivery algorithm, user choices and targeting parameters chosen. Of the 15 adverts sent by the Liberal Democrats, they decided to retire types 1-10 and continue with types 11-15. This will be due to the clickthrough rate of these adverts, as well as the demographics reached.

The adverts that were continued reached a more equal group of people, especially more men than other versions of the adverts. The party had found the Jo's to use, with this testing leading to many instances of Jo 12 and 15 seen on and offline (Figure 2). Even leaflets used image 15, showing the wider impact of the digital campaign. Although this was prior to the Liberal Democrats being presented with evidence that Jo Swinson was a vote loser which led to her removal from leaflets and adverts late in the campaign.

Overall, this election showed us that A/B testing is now ubiquitous for the political parties, with it occurring on all types of messages right up to election day. Political parties using Facebook ads have today a powerful capacity to hone their messages. Unlike the past where expensive and hard to organise focus groups were the only avenue available for parties to test their messages; today all the political parties engage in multivariate testing of images, messages and content forms. Thousands of instances were seen, with the majority testing

policy, colours, styles and messaging. Political parties have never had it so good.

Facebook, through targeted advertising, has allowed parties to engage in complex psychological experiments, hyper-charging their content to maximise their intended goals. This has both positive and negatives. On the one hand it gives parties greater opportunities to activate support, inform the public of policy positions, issues and candidates, test policy messaging and increase the campaign learning potential of content. However, A/B testing can also be used to hone negative messages, promoting a more polarised and negative campaign discourse. Today parties can fight as much on demobilisation as mobilisation, threatening the operation of democracy. This ability for parties to hypercharge their messaging is a new campaign norm, and one we should question. We the voters are being compartmentalised, fractured apart and sold different ideas, with this having stark impacts on the foundations of common ground of politics. It is our activity online that makes this process possible and as such we have a right to understand whether we are being A/B tested online and what for.



Figure 1

Graph 1. The audiences of the different Jo ads

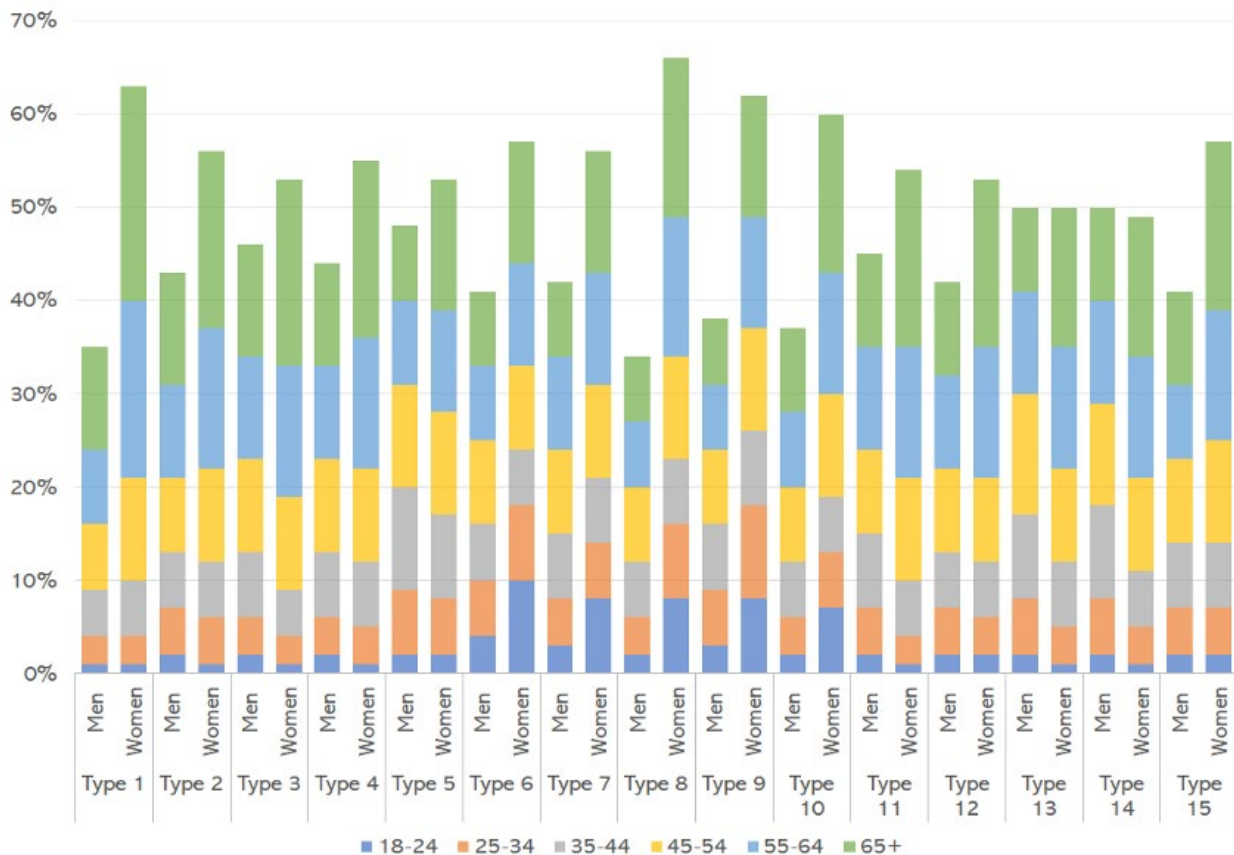


Figure 2

Against opacity, outrage and deception in digital political campaigning



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In the 2015 UK General Election, £3m was spent on advertising on platforms, companies, consultants and strategists. In the 2017 General Election, over £6m was spent. This includes increased use of data analytics (automated insights into datasets using data-mining techniques), and data management approaches to “profile” audiences (via mathematical techniques to discover patterns in “big data”). It includes increased use of iterative, large-scale, rapid testing of ads online (“A/B” tests) to identify and deploy the most persuasive ad; and to gather data on, and target, the most important voters with tailored messages.

While using such techniques to mobilise activists and engage voters is good for democracy, these processes are opaque. Potential harms arising include fragmented national conversations (A/B testing allows secret negative messaging to niche audiences without alienating the broader electorate); and undue political influence over voters by exploiting their vulnerabilities (such as inability to recognise deception).

In 2019, the UK Parliament’s House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies asked whether greater transparency in digital political campaigning would improve the UK’s electoral process. To answer this, we analysed the Leave groups’ campaigns from the 2016 Brexit Referendum. We concluded that we need an ethical code of conduct for transparent, explainable, civil and informative digital political campaigns (see Table 1). The 2019 General Election confirms this need.

Unethical campaigning: the 2019 General Election

Contravening transparency. Since 2018, Google and Facebook provide publicly searchable libraries of election ads and spending on their platforms: each Facebook ad also says who paid for it. However, abuse continues. Cambridge-based Green Party activists complained that campaigning group 3rd Party Ltd managed by Vote Leave’s former chief technology officer (Thomas Borwick) was pretending to be the Green Party by buying Facebook and Instagram ads encouraging people in swing constituencies to “Vote Green”. 3rd Party Ltd also ran social media ads to “Save Brexit”. Borwick boasted that he could use proxy groups on Facebook to “split the vote” of Conservative opponents.

Contravening explainability. Facebook’s political ad library includes information on broad geographic targeting (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), broad demographic targeting (age, gender), reach and amount spent on ads. Since February 2019, users can click on a Facebook button ‘Why am I seeing this ad?’ which tells them the brand that paid for the ad, some biographical details targeted, if and when the brand or one of their agency/developer partners uploaded the

user’s contact information, and when access was shared between partners. However, there is no information on finer-grained targeting such as use of psychographics and probabilistic data inferences from metadata; or to what campaign end they were targeted (e.g. voter mobilisation, suppression).

Contravening civility. Early in the campaign, the Liberal Democrats tested 13 identical Facebook ads attacking Corbyn, with differently provocative headlines on Corbyn’s personal lack of trustworthiness, weakness and failure to stamp out hate, discrimination and anti-Semitism in his party. Accusations of anti-Semitism grew increasingly shrill, with Chief Rabbi Mirvis urging people to “vote with their conscience” as “A new poison – sanctioned from the very top – has taken root in the Labour Party” (selectively evidencing Corbyn’s past comments and associations).

Contravening informativeness. Numerous examples of deception include the Conservative Party press office assuming a false identity online, creating a parody Labour manifesto site, circulating doctored, misleading videos of the opposition, and contravening Google’s ad rules. Labour ran misleading Facebook ads on how much Labour’s policies would save the “average family”.

Transparency is Not Enough

Unethical campaigning proliferates despite large tech companies’ efforts to reduce opacity via greater transparency and explainability. Since campaigning started in October, Twitter committed to stop accepting most political ads (from 22 November onwards). On 20 November, Google said that targeting of election ads would be limited to general categories (age, gender, post code location); and advertisers would no longer be able to target political messages based on users’ interests inferred from browsing or search histories. While tech companies should continue to reduce opacity, the onus lies on political campaigners to meet the ethical demands for civility and informativeness.



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Table 1: Ethical Code of Conduct for Digital Political Campaigns

Transparency	Make clear if political messages online come from a party, how much campaigners spend on digital campaigning, and on what.
Explainability	In campaigns that extensively use AI to profile voters, give all voters an explanation of the profiling.
Civility	Campaign material should be civil (e.g. not nasty, aggressive, disrespectful, or pitched to provoke anger and outrage) and must not incite others to commit crimes (e.g. making false statements of fact about candidates' personal character or conduct). If campaigners deliberately breach civility codes to become righteously uncivil (for moral reasons), then rationally justify why.
Informativeness	Campaigns should give voters enough information to freely make informed judgments. The information provided should be true, complete, undistorted and relevant.

The explosion of the public sphere



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It is Thursday, 21st November 2019. The Labour manifesto has just been published and you want to know what to think about it. You could, of course, read all 107 pages of the manifesto in full online, or snack on Labour Party digests of it (including Jeremy Corbyn's 60 second synopsis from the back of a moving car). Alternatively, you could go to the Conservatives' critique of it at labourmanifesto.co.uk (briefly the top ad when you search Google for 'Labour').

Rather than read the necessarily one-sided pitches by the parties themselves, you probably want some non-party analysis. For this you will not find yourself wanting. For lightning reactions you can scroll through the thousands of tweets under #labourmanifesto. For more thoughtful responses you can read breakdowns from every thinktank from the IFS to the IEA, from the Institute for Government to the UK in a Changing Europe. If you are aligned to a particular cause you can look at the many posts from NGOs and campaign groups, from Greenpeace to Taxpayers Alliance.

The national media didn't hold back in their reporting and analysis. Of the more than 4,500 news articles published online on 21st November by the UK's national newspapers and broadcasters, you could read just under 300 reporting on Labour's manifesto.

Then there are the online native news sites. BuzzFeed, Vice or Huffington Post will give you a general view. For an inside take you could turn to Politico, or PoliticsHome, Politics Means Politics or Politics.co.uk. For insight you might choose Tortoise, or CapX, The Conversation or Unherd. Or perhaps you want to confirm your partisan prejudice at ConservativeHome, the New European, or Labour List. Further from the centre still you can find coverage on Breitbart, Novara Media, the Canary, Skwawkbox, Evolve Politics, Westmonster, or Politicalite. Or you might find yourself following a link to a lesser known online news site, like LondonEconomic, Joe.co.uk, the Descrier, the Overtake, or ScramNews. Or one of a growing collection of sites whose origins, ownership, and objectives are obscure or entirely opaque – such as ukupdates.co.uk.

Exhausted by the idea of trawling through each of these sites individually? How about using a news aggregator: AOL News, Yahoo News, MSN News, Bing News, NewsNow.co.uk, or even Newsdump.co.uk. If you would rather get a personal take on the manifesto you could watch one of many YouTube vloggers (such as TLDR, A Different Bias or Akkad Daily), read innumerable blogs (like briefingsforbrexit.com), sign up for one of dozens of newsletters, or listen to one of a bevy of podcasts (Reasons to be Cheerful, Remainiacs, The Political Party, or Talking Politics). Alternatively, you could gauge what effect the manifesto is having on Labour's

odds at politicalbetting.com, or track the polls at one of the many polling sites (including YouGov, Ipsos MORI or Lord Ashcroft polls).

We are inundated with political news and views, and this is simply the production of political news and opinion rather than its redistribution, adaptation, and consumption. Your interpretation of the manifesto will almost certainly be conditioned by the context in which you find it. If, for example, you are one of the 109,393 people who follow the Fight4Brexit group on Facebook, then the manifesto will be framed as a proposal for a second EU referendum. Or you might be one of the 226,000 members of the r/ukpolitics community on Reddit critiquing mainstream media and making their own assessments of the party's promises.

Much of the current debate about 'fake news', false claims, and polarized debate, does not adequately acknowledge the most significant change in political communication in the last two decades – the explosion of the public sphere. There is a cacophony of voices competing to be heard – individuals, groups, communities, for-profit and non-profit organisations, campaigners, governments (foreign and domestic).

This means that many of the established theories we reach for when thinking about political communication, such as agenda-setting, framing and priming, need to be fundamentally reconceptualized. Who is setting the agenda of an active member of Fight4Brexit or r/ukpolitics? It means that quantitative content analysis – the bread and butter of lots of media research – has become vastly more complex and more difficult. What does counting the number of articles published in a handful of mainstream publications now tell us about the impact of media on public attitudes and opinions?

The 2019 UK election campaign has parallels with that of 1983. An unelectable Labour leader, a hard-left Labour Party, a collapse of Labour support in traditional strongholds, all ending with a hefty Conservative majority. Yet, despite these similarities, there is one aspect that is unrecognisably different – the media and communications landscape. And, as yet, we have yet to understand – or even know how to understand – what this really means for our politics.

Big chickens, dumbfakes, squirrel killers: was 2019 the election where ‘shitposting’ went mainstream?

On the second official day of the 2019 election campaign, the BBC Political Editor Laura Kuenssberg appeared on the BBC’s Brexitcast podcast and was asked what ‘shitposting’ was. She said “Political parties or campaign groups make an advert that looks really rubbish and then people share it online saying, ‘Oh I can’t believe how shit this is’ and then it gets shared and shared and shared and shared and they go, ‘Ha ha ha, job done’” (Brexitcast, 2019). Although Kuenssberg was correct that some of the Conservative adverts had been shitposts, she did not understand the phenomenon more broadly and this attracted much opprobrium from online commenters due to her inaccurate description. As Alex Hern, the Guardian’s tech editor explained, shitposting is ‘the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers’ (New Statesman, 2019). Sarah Manavis, digital expert for the New Statesman, wrote that shitposting would likely play a part in the election and it was important for the BBC Political Editor to understand it (ibid).

Manavis proved correct, and shitposting did indeed play a part in this campaign, even being incorporated into formal party communications and causing a party leader to have to deny information contained in one. In the run up to the election, the official Conservative Twitter account tweeted a picture of Jeremy Corbyn’s head Photoshopped onto a man in a chicken costume with the caption ‘Hey @KFC_UKI we found an even bigger chicken than you’. The assertion was that Corbyn was running scared from an election that the Conservatives were attempting to call at that time. However, the post was very much out of the shitposter playbook, with a low quality stock image, poor Photoshop, absurd tagging of KFC and a caption that did not make sense.

In a follow up to this, around a week into the campaign, the official Conservative account uploaded a video of Kier Starmer on Good Morning Britain. However, instead of the original footage, they had edited the video to add pauses after questions to make it seem as though Starmer did not have a ready answer, and added wacky music (The Guardian, 2019). Again, this is a common shitposter technique or ‘dumbfake’. It is generally not meant to be taken seriously and when viewed by people who understand the language of shitposting would not be mistaken for the real thing. However, stripped of the context of coming from a known shitposter account, the video merely looked misleading, and this was how it was taken by many people (and possibly how it was intended). Instead of a joke, it was labelled ‘fake news’, perhaps highlighting the perils of attempting to incorporate this type of communication into more mainstream campaigns.

The Liberal Democrats also felt the effects of shitposting going mainstream, but as a victim of it rather than a deployer. A well-known shitposting account @groovyguyzone (now permanently banned from Twitter) posted a clearly-faked newspaper article which purported to have uncovered old Facebook posts from Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson declaring how much she loved killing squirrels, and referring to them as ‘pleb bunnies’. Again, for the intended audience this was an obvious joke and a riff on her blasé attitude to pressing the Trident nuclear button in an interview earlier that week. However, a few days later the post made its way onto Facebook, where there tends to be less social media-savvy and more credulous audiences. It spread to such a degree that Swinson was forced to deny on a radio interview that she enjoys killing squirrels and she furthermore decried the spread of ‘fake news’ (Buzzfeed, 2019).

All of this tells us that despite social media having been a common political tool for over 10 years now, for many users of these platforms, there is still a lack of understanding about some of the more niche communication cultures online. Shitposts are not fake news in the same way that satire sites such as The Onion are not fake news. However, if less critical audiences believe them, as happened with the squirrel-killer post, the line between jokes and disinformation does become blurred in this digital context, and could have an impact during events such as election campaigns. A quick Google of the headline of these shitposts would tell people that the stories are not real. As there is a real push presently to ensure a higher level of digital and social media literacy, it would likely be valuable to incorporate an increased awareness of shitposting and shitposting techniques into this education too.



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News and journalism

Time to fix our TV debates

Even in an election campaign were few individuals or institutions emerged with credit, the organisation of televised debates was particularly shambolic.

To recap, the centrepieces of the debate schedule were two head-to-head leaders' debates featuring Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Additionally, there were a smorgasbord of other programmes including seven-way leaders' debates (which Johnson and Corbyn did not attend, instead sending party representatives); party leader-focused editions of Question Time; policy-focused debates on issues such as climate change; and programmes for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The 2019 debate schedule proved that quantity does not guarantee quality. Nor does novelty. While the two head-to-head leaders' debates were a first for a UK election, the content of the programmes was largely limited to pre-prepared talking points. Furthermore, the two-way debates ran the risk of distorting the electoral playing field, neglecting the decisions that faced voters in constituencies which were not a straight contest between the Conservatives and Labour.

How did we end up in this situation? Debates in the UK are not regulated but rather negotiated by self-interested political parties and broadcasters on ad hoc basis each time the country goes to the polls. Hence the changing formats over the years – the three-party debates of 2010, the seven-party debate of 2015, the absence of meaningful debates in 2017, and now the two-party debates of 2019.

This creates a huge problem, as it means the rules for debate inclusion are non-transparent. To ask a counterfactual question, in a parallel universe where Liberal Democrat support had surged during the election campaign, what poll numbers would Jo Swinson have required to be invited to attend the ITV and BBC debates? We have no idea because the broadcasters never developed criteria for inclusion (or if they did, they never revealed them).

Additionally, over the course of recent elections, the way broadcasters are negotiating debates has changed. In 2010, the programmes were the product of broadcasters acting as a consortium. This is why each organisation (the BBC, ITV and Sky) got to lead on one of the three programmes. Now there appears to be far greater competition between broadcasters. Indeed, Sky admitted as much when it pitched for a three-way debate. Their original plan had been for a debate between Johnson and Corbyn, but since ITV had got agreement for this format first, Sky modified their proposal. Needless to say, because it did not suit the agenda of the two major parties, the Sky debate never happened. Competition among broadcasters of this kind is a real problem, as it means politicians (particularly those from the larger parties) can play them off against each other

to get their preferred formats.

The Channel 4 climate change debate highlighted other problems. This was attended by five party leaders. Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage did not accept the invitation from the broadcasters. Instead, they were replaced by blocks of ice on the debate stage. On the night of the debate, Conservative Minister Michael Gove arrived at the studio and demanded to be included in the debate. This request was refused by Channel 4, on the grounds that the debate was for party leaders.

While Gove's actions were clearly grandstanding, designed to create a story for social media, this event raises a question about why Channel 4 felt a leaders' debate was an appropriate format to discuss climate change. After all parties have environment ministers and spokespeople charged with the environment brief. If we are generous, we can say Channel 4's decision is the product of the UK's dysfunctional system of cabinet government which has become overly presidentialised. Less charitably, we might say that the network felt party leaders would get higher ratings.

We urgently need to look overseas at other parliamentary democracies for better ways to organise election debates. Canada is a Westminster-style Parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system including strong regional parties, which has held election debates since 1968. Perhaps the most important lesson the UK could learn from Canada comes from the creation of the Independent Leaders' Debate Commission in 2018 (prior to this, debates had been organised by a consortium of broadcasters, although even then the rules for organisation were considerably more advanced and transparent than anything in the UK). The Commission organised the two debates in the 2019 election campaign, applying very clear rules for inclusion, which are laid out in the Order of Council that created it.

For the avoidance of doubt: TV debates are a good innovation, with the potential to enhance the election campaign for voters and help them make informed choices. But this makes it even more important they are not created through shoddy backroom deals between politicians and broadcasters. It is time for the UK to get serious about TV debates.



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What was all that about, then? The media agenda in the 2019 General Election



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There has been a striking amount of controversy about the mainstream media's role during this election, almost all of which has focused on the evaluative dimensions of coverage. But what about the interpretative aspects of the campaign? To paraphrase Bernard Cohen: what were we being told to think about in 2019?

As it has for every General Election since 1992, Loughborough University conducted a 'real time' content analysis of all weekday election coverage in the main evening TV news bulletins and front pages and prioritised editorial spaces of all national, paid for newspapers.

In Table 1 we compare the main issues that were reported across the five weeks of the formal campaign (7 November to 11 December inclusive). It is no surprise to see electoral process coverage dominating the show. Journalists have always been interested in the drama of the electoral horse race, deconstructing the parties' strategies, consulting citizens' perspectives and revelling in *schadenfreude* at politicians' missteps. Levels of process coverage in 2019 broadly matched those observed in 2017.

Also unsurprising is the dominance of Brexit. Some news organisations were so confident of its salience that they burned it into their electoral straplines from the outset (e.g. *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and, controversially, Sky TV). In 2019 Brexit gained more prominence than it did in 2017, but not by as much as one might have anticipated (13 percent compared to 11 percent). TV news gave greatest emphasis to this policy.

Aside from Brexit, the clearest difference between news sectors was coverage of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland's future role in the United Kingdom. This received some degree of presence in TV news coverage but barely registered in press terms.

Elsewhere, there was striking consistency between the two news sectors as to the other main issues. The economy, the health service and taxation were predictably prominent. A major reason for the relatively high rankings for 'Standards/ / scandals' and 'Minorities/ religion' was the allegations made against the Labour party and its supposed failure to deal with anti-semitism in its ranks.

The environment received more coverage than it did in 2017, but only marginally so (up to 3 percent from 1 percent in 2017). Though coverage of the environment may be increasing, it has yet to be emphasised in party political terms in election coverage.

In the last week of the campaign, Boris Johnson was condemned for criticising EU migrants who 'treat the UK as if it's part of their own country'. It was a clear echo of the Vote Leave strategy in the 2016 EU Referendum, but this time around it didn't resonate in media terms.

Coverage of 'Immigration/ border controls' was 2 percent down from levels observed in the 2017 General Election.

But what of the temporal dynamics of the campaign? Figure 1 shows the relative prominence of the main policy themes and reveal considerable volatility week-by-week. Brexit was by far the most dominant theme at critical points of the campaign – its start and end –but in the intervening periods its prominence lessened, to the point in week 4 that it fell behind all other three major themes.

This dramatic decline needs some interpretation. Brexit was still there, but as our analysis focused on manifest content, the results showed how it had become increasingly part of the background context of the campaign rather than its focal point. That said, we know that many voters only start paying attention in the last days of an election, so the final rush of Brexit coverage could have been consequential.

Even when Brexit was reported, there was a lack of policy focused analysis as to what implementation might mean. This stood in contrast to the detailed appraisals often applied to other manifesto commitments. For example, the Institute for Fiscal Studies gained considerable campaign coverage through their analysis of parties' spending pledges and projections. Fifty three percent of their appearances linked to taxation related coverage and 46 percent to business and economy coverage. Only 8 percent connected to Brexit¹.

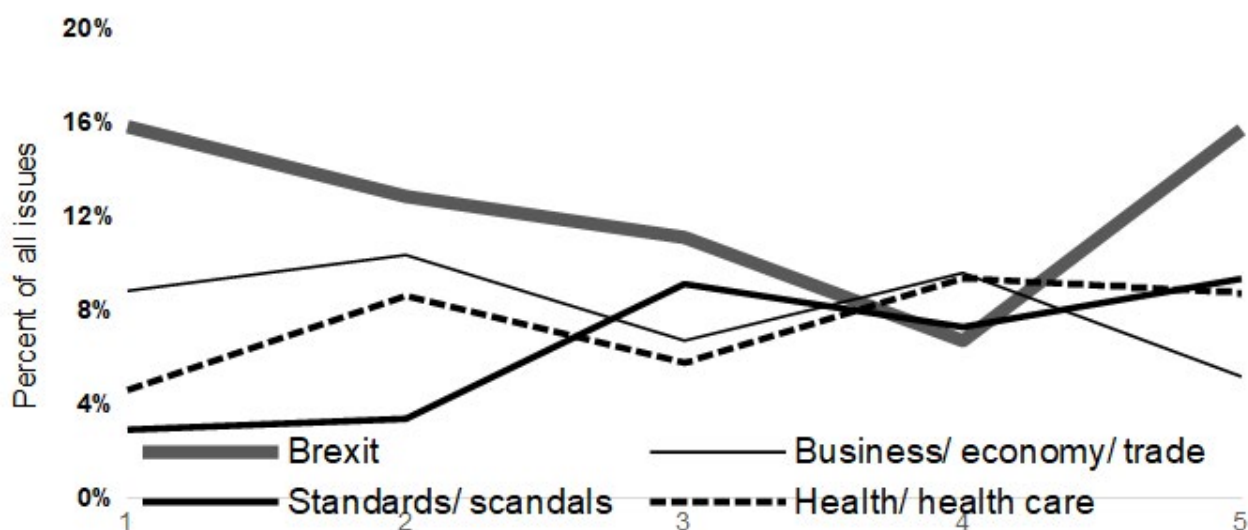
At the start of the campaign the Prime Minister claimed his withdrawal deal was 'oven ready'. In the following critical weeks, to extend the metaphor, the media did precious little to assess its fat content or salt levels.

¹ These percentages are separate and do not add up to 100.

Table 1: Key issues in the 2019 General Election (percentage)

	TV	Press	All
<i>Electoral process</i>	31	32	31
<i>Brexit/ EU</i>	18	11	13
<i>Business/ economy/ trade</i>	6	9	8
<i>Health/ health care</i>	7	7	7
<i>Standards/ scandals</i>	6	7	7
<i>Taxation</i>	4	6	5
<i>Minorities/ religion</i>	4	4	4
<i>Defence/ military/ security/ terrorism</i>	3	4	4
<i>Public services</i>	4	3	3
<i>Environment</i>	4	2	3
<i>Immigration/ border controls</i>	2	2	2
<i>Scotland/ Wales/ Northern Ireland</i>	5	1	2
<i>Social Security</i>	1	2	2
<i>Crime/ law and order</i>	1	2	2
<i>Education</i>	1	1	1
<i>All other issues</i>	3	7	6

Figure 1: Top issues by week (all media)



Pluralism or partisanship? Calibrating punditry on BBC2's Politics Live



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What should pluralistic punditry look like in a multi-party parliamentary democracy? How should a state-owned broadcaster's flagship political show populate its panels before elections to guarantee balance between Left, Right and Centre, eliminate perceptions of bias, and maintain that most disputed measure of fairness: impartiality?

When BBC2's Politics Live was unveiled as a snappier, social media-friendly successor to long-running Westminster digest The Daily Politics in July 2018, the announcement was couched in studiously public service-tinged terms: as part of a package of improved "political and parliamentary output" designed to deliver "trusted impartial" coverage and combat "concerns about misinformation and 'echo chambers'". These bold claims have since been tested through producer Rob Burley's tortuous explanations of his efforts to calibrate the show's party-political balance on Twitter. "The fact that Party X is on a programme on one day and Party Y is not does not mean the programme is being unfair on Party Y", he pre-emptively tweeted days before the launch of the 2019 election campaign, because "on future programmes Party Y will appear". This meant that, "over the course of a series or an election period", the show would achieve "the correct balance between the parties".

But how realistic is it to expect viewers to stay tuned to a programme for weeks or months in order to be exposed to a fair spread of coverage? And how does *Politics Live*'s peculiar mode of impartiality measure up – even judged on its own, debatable, terms?

A provisional breakdown of on-air contributors to the show between 2 September 2019 (the start of its second series) and 11 December (the final day of the election campaign) suggests the balance between pundits one might broadly categorise as Left and Right was roughly equal. Each 'wing' enjoyed around 33% of the limelight, with the Left actually enjoying a marginal advantage (at 160 to the Right's 158) if the Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru and Greens were bracketed alongside Labour. But throwing a further 10 'libertarian' contributors into the mix, including stalwart Left antagonists Brendan O'Neill, editor of *Spiked*, and fellow ex-communist contrarian Claire Fox (now a Brexit Party MEP), it seems safe to characterise the overall Left/Right balance as broadly fair.

Viewed through a strictly party-political lens, however, the breakdown begins to vindicate Labour's pre-election complaint about the BBC's 'anti-Labour framing'. Over the entire three-month period, the number of Conservative politicians interviewed on *Politics Live* was 65 (36% of the total), compared to Labour's 62 (34%). Significantly, this imbalance proved especially stark during the 'phony election' phase: the period before stricter Ofcom impartiality rules formally

kicked in. During this time, Tory MPs, MEPs and candidates outnumbered Labour ones by 41 to 35 (37% to 31%). Although the SNP, Plaid and Greens bolstered the Left's representation by collectively notching up 23 contributors across the three months, their relative prominence (18, 3 and 2 slots respectively) might be justified by their real-world electoral standings at the time, particularly if these include vote-shares in the 2017 election (measures to which we return). More contentious, arguably, was the appearance across the period of 12 pundits from the Brexit Party – all but two of whom featured before the election was called. Though Nigel Farage's party would be side-lined during the official campaign, it provided 9% of all panellists beforehand. This gave it an agenda-setting prominence that could only conceivably be justified in the context of its then recent European election success and defining contribution to the Brexit debate.

What, then, of the official campaign period? In the five weeks before polling-day Labour pundits actually outnumbered Tories by 27 to 24, though this Left/Right imbalance was easily offset by the inclusion of a disproportionate number of journalists from right-wing outlets and several 'neutral' contributors with normatively neoliberal agendas, notably the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). A more telling pattern was declining visibility of the Centre – whose share of screen-time halved from 10% to 5% between phony election and campaign, as its Liberal Democrat standard-bearers were squeezed from 11% to 9%.

Arguably, this 'Centrist squeeze' merely reflected the wider polarisation of today's political debate. But is this good enough? Discounting the most literal definition of pluralism – that all UK-wide parties should be given equal exposure, proportional representation-style, during an election campaign – shouldn't *Politics Live* allot airtime based on individual parties' real-world standing? Well, in some respects, it did: the Lib Dems' 8.7% of screen-time compared to a 7.4% vote-share in the 2017 election. Yet if their exposure had been based on their most recent electoral successes we might have seen twice as much of them: the party's 2019 European election vote-share was second only to the Brexit Party's (20.3% to 31.6%). As this approach would have cut Labour's airtime to just 14% and the Tories' to 9%, however, it's easy to see why achieving measurable impartiality remains such an editorial headache. Maybe *Politics Live* didn't do such a bad job after all.

Hero and villain: the media's role in identity management

The role played by news media in the identity management of politicians as a means to control the public's perceptions of those key individuals was a significant feature in the run up to the 2019 election. The UK's press is heavily influenced by right-wing, neo-liberal ideologues and as such their representation of society, through their construction of an individual's identity, reflects their interests and objectives which in turn impacts on the attitudes of large swathes of the population. During the election campaign, members of the in-group, those supportive of the status quo, were made to appear normal and likeable, reducing the figurative distance between them and the electorate, whereas the out-group, the left and the liberals, irrational and untrustworthy.

In an age of mistrust and the public's thirst for greater democratic representation, our political system has been infiltrated by politicians claiming to be more representative of the public and an alternative to the establishment. Take for example the Brexit Party leader, Nigel Farage, who has been positioned as an everyday pint drinking, fag smoking British bloke willing to take on the elite. Alongside his anti-elite message, via the battle cry of the Brexit party, privately educated Farage positioned himself as representative of the British public. Much like his multi-billionaire friend Donald or The Donald, stirring things up on the other side of the pond, this image, propagated by the media, has resonated with a public desperate for change.

Unsurprisingly, this unscrupulous tactic of appearing normal and empathetic to the public's concerns, extends to more mainstream politicians who recognise the significant role personae plays in gaining power and influence. So, with their well-paid brand managers in tow they cultivate a public image which sells. The darling of the right-wing press, Boris Johnson (BJ), was rarely out of the spotlight throughout the election with significant attention placed on his buffoonery and off the cuff remarks. In ordinary circumstances, his quips about ethnic minority groups, his deceptive mis-information – the construction claim for 40 new hospitals that turned out to be only six, as an example - may have been perceived as detrimental to a Prime Ministerial candidate, yet, the media were able to manipulate this persona into something positive. In contrast to the immaculately constructed identities of past leaders such as Tony Blair, Nick Clegg and David Cameron, seen as representative of the establishment, BJ was presented as a person willing and honest enough to express his true self, differentiating him from those within the perceived elite.

The portrayal of ordinariness is even more surprising given the fact that, Eton educated, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson is as establishment as they come, and yet this normal identity, in

its various guises, was pervasive across the media. In particular, the use of *Boris* or the affectionate *Bojo* were ubiquitous within both left- and right-wing publications. For instance, a Google search for the term *Boris* generates 384 million results directly relevant to BJ demonstrating the almost brand like association his first name carries. Conversely, other politicians were rarely attributed the same level of informality, maintaining the distance between them and the electorate, while at the same time positioning BJ as somebody familiar and trustworthy.

Amazingly, in spite of a decade of callous austerity at the hands of the Tories, where public spending cuts have been rife, impacting on the living standards of the poorest, and resulting in over a million food banks users, the only person regularly cast as the villain was BJ's opponent, Jeremy Corbyn (JC), hailed as a threat to the UK's economy and security. Despite a history of peaceful protest, anti-war sentiment and much needed public spending proposals, JC was vilified in the media as an anti-Semite, communist, IRA supporter and a terrorist sympathiser. In other words, in contrast to the haphazard, mischief maker BJ, JC was attributed the worst possible traits of any potential leader: a racist, anti-patriotic, anti-democratic, dangerous loon. Indeed, rather than celebrating his desire for multi-lateral nuclear disarmament, his entirely hypothetical reluctance to launch nuclear weapons on another nation and progressive policies that attempted to wrestle control from the elite, JC was cast as the enemy of the state, unable to defend the nation and keep it secure.

Evidently, the public persona of politicians can mean the difference between success and failure, irrespective of policies or previous actions. In the case of the 2019 election, the media went into overdrive with the continuous identity manipulation of the two main protagonists, transforming BJ's negatives into positives and redefining JC's character from a resilient, forth right politician, determined to impact positive change, into a feeble-minded, communist unable to govern the country. That said, a multitude of factors contributed to a Tory victory, not least Brexit, though, to use a music analogy, their lyrics were predictable, but with a tireless marketing team and a charismatic front man at the helm their success was never in doubt, even for the most optimistic of Labour supporters.



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Traditional majoritarian conceptions of UK politics pose a dilemma for the media in elections



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When the BBC's Huw Edwards announced the exit poll shortly after 10pm on the 12th December, two figures flashed up on our television screens: the projected number of Commons seats for the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, accompanied by pictures of their respective leaders. The poll predicted a Conservative government, with 368 seats, with the Labour opposition standing at an estimated 191. Such a picture is typical of the UK's electoral landscape, underpinned by what Dutch scientist Arendt Lijphart termed a 'majoritarian' political system; one characterised by (among other things) two main political parties and a first-past-the-post electoral system. For most elections in the post-war period, voters have gone to the polls in the certainty that the either the Conservative or the Labour party would see their leader standing on the steps of Downing Street. For a long time media coverage at election time focused overwhelmingly on the two main parties, with print media nailing their colours to the mast of one of them.

The 2015 General Election (which saw the rise of the SNP at Westminster and the impressive vote share achieved by UKIP) marked the first real step change in this two-party dominance and this was further evidenced in 2019. While the majority of the print media overwhelmingly backed one of the big two parties, *The Economist* sided with the Liberal Democrats, and some, such as *The New Statesman* and *i News*, refusing to endorse any party. The election results themselves also bore this out. While the two main parties received 83% of the vote in 2017, this fell to 73% in 2019. In practice this means that over five million people voted for parties other than Labour and the Conservatives and they returned MPs from eight small parties, bringing the total number of parties represented in the House of Commons to ten.

The weakening grip of the Conservative and Labour parties within an increasingly fragmented party system poses a challenge for broadcasters in their election coverage and reporting. The result in 2019 was something of a cacophony of debates; from a seven way ITV debate, to a four way Question Time special and the BBC's head-to-head with Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Even these did not include all of the political parties standing candidates at the election. Nor did they include all of the political parties who held Commons seats at the time of the election – three sitting Independent Group for Change MPs for example were also standing in their respective constituencies but played no part in any of the debates.

The smaller parties were enthusiastic about their inclusion in these debates, something which Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson had pressed for prior to the election, but the two main parties did their utmost to exclude them. When Swinson took legal action against ITV alongside the SNP's

Nicola Sturgeon, Jeremy Corbyn stuck firmly to majoritarian principles, backing the head to head debates between himself and Boris Johnson on the basis that "there are only two possible people who can be prime minister at the end of this campaign". When smaller parties do gain visibility in election debates they tend to attract support from the public. Nick Clegg outshone everyone for the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 debate and UKIP and the SNP performed particularly strongly in 2015. This time around it was the Brexit Party's Richard Tice who seemed to impress viewers with his performance.

The haggling over big media appearances is not helped by the ambiguity in Ofcom's broadcasting code which states that 'due weight' and 'appropriate coverage' should be given to different organisations and perspectives but does not clarify who these actually are or how such a balance is ensured. Neither is it likely to go away. With analysis showing that a more proportional electoral system would have brought over 70 more seats for the smaller parties, it will be increasingly important to find a balance between majoritarian traditions and multi-party realities of media reporting and programming during election campaigns.

#GE2019: a tale of two elections?

The day after the 2016 EU referendum, I took part in a conference at St James's Park, in central London. When I entered the building, I was met by looks of disbelief and shock of how it had come to this, and how seemingly none of us had predicted the outcome. And although polls suggested a majority win for Boris Johnson under the Conservatives this time around, I had a distinct sense of déjà-vu when I was asked by a stunned colleague: "But how did this happen? Almost everything I saw online suggested it was going terribly for the Tories". He may be forgiven – my own Twitter feed looked no different: from posts mocking Tory chairman James Cleverly for his inept defence of the indefensible – namely, re-branding the Conservatives' account as 'FactCheck UK' – to outrage of Jacob Rees-Mogg's contempt for the victims of Grenfell – my followers called them out, constantly – and rightly so. Contrast this with many parts of the 'traditional' media, and my sense is that people may have experienced a different election altogether.

Research by the Reuters Institute speaks to this: 52% of the over 45s cite TV as their main source of news, compared to only 27% for those under the age of 45. Online, the picture looks different: 63% of under 45s use online media as their main source, compared to only 26% for those over the age of 45. The role of traditional media, and TV in particular, matters: first, their research also suggests that those identifying with the political right prefer to get their news offline (58% combined for print and TV); second, because broadcast agendas are often set by the dominant role of partisan, pro-Conservative newspapers. A tangible example is *The Sunday* paper review on the *Andrew Marr Show*, where commentators – among those Sarah Vine, whose husband happens to be Conservative MP Michael Gove – debate the day's headlines.

And newspaper coverage matters, too: the two with the highest circulations, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, both pro-Brexit papers, sell over a million copies a day. And although, as elsewhere, their circulations are declining (from 2010 to 2019, *The Sun*'s dropped from 3m to 1.4m, while *The Daily Mail*'s fell from 2.1m to 1.2m), they are still significant in shaping public opinion. In its October 30 leader column, for example, *The Daily Mail* wrote: "Labour was devising ever more elaborate ways to pick your pocket and flatten the economy ... Just take a moment to think of that gruesome prospect". *The Sun* went much further: four days before the election, in its three-page 'Dossier of Doom', it referred to the Labour leader as "the most dangerous man ever to stand for high office", before declaring: "Waking up to Corbyn as PM on Friday the 13th would just be the start of a... NIGHTMARE". Such highly partisan coverage was also a staple in the 2017 election.

Of course, these are just two examples from the two highest-circulating newspapers in the UK. Yet, research by Loughborough University, which measured positive and negative coverage across several papers, suggests that they are emblematic of a wider malaise: in the four weeks of campaigning, coverage was overwhelmingly hostile towards Labour, while the ruling Conservatives were portrayed favourably. Left-leaning exceptions to that rule include *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror*, but there was little they could do to offset that trend. In 'traditional' media, Labour seemed to have lost the battle from the outset.

But when we look online, a different picture starts to emerge: here, as in 2017, smaller, alternative outlets left their mark, too – many of which came out in strong support for Corbyn. These include The Canary, Evolve Politics, Novara Media, Skwawkbox and Another Angry Voice. The latter is particularly interesting: operating as a 'one-man show' (the blog is written by Thomas G. Clark, an English tutor from West Yorkshire), its accompanying Facebook site consistently achieves levels of traffic usually expected of mainstream media. His post on election night has, at the time of writing, attracted 13k interactions ('likes', comments and shares combined), while his take on Johnson's repetitive 'get Brexit done' soundbite ('Get Boris done') has attracted more than 2k on the same day. The only other two 'alt-media' on the right-wing spectrum include Guido Fawkes and Breitbart – both however attract lower engagement levels. In the mainstream media, the Guardian's excellent 'Anywhere but Westminster' series provide an alternative viewpoint, too – away from the Westminster bubble and the Commons chambers.

Yet, despite their value, we know now that they were unable to cut through the noise of Johnson's 'get Brexit done' soundbite. The last week of campaigning even saw Johnson break through a foam wall with a bulldozer carrying the phrase to 'break the gridlock'. The following day, the stunt featured heavily on the two conservative, Eurosceptic newspapers, the *Daily Express* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Often featured, but less often scrutinised, in an election campaign that sowed confusion and peddled misinformation, he, ultimately, got away with it. Lesson learned? That despite the rise of alternative outlets, it's the mainstream media that continue to set the agenda. The demographic divide, and the different media diets we consume, may well explain why this was, perhaps, a tale of two elections.



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Boxing clever: negotiating gender in campaign coverage during the 2019 General Election



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Despite more women party leaders contesting general elections in recent years, campaign strategists and journalists alike seem to repeatedly replicate the same-old tropes about leadership expectations. Throughout the campaign gendered notions of political leadership still abound, and in some quarters appear to be accelerating. This was neatly illustrated by the copious examples of politicians such as Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and Jo Swinson posing in boxing rings during the early weeks of the campaign. Here I will consider the gendered nature of campaign, focusing on portrayals of Jo Swinson and Boris Johnson.

During the 2017 campaign, I argued that Theresa May's highly personalised campaign centred around her own competence and leadership was extremely risky for a female leader. Academic research has shown that personalised campaigns are fraught with the risk of reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about the incompatibility between traditional femininity and conventional ideals of political leadership. Political leadership is often associated with traditionally masculine traits and behaviours such as combativeness, strength and assertiveness, and furthermore my own work has shown that media coverage is crucial in reinforcing these ideas. The disappointing election campaign for May's Conservative Party should perhaps have served as a warning to any subsequent female party leader. Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats in 2019 seemed content to emphasise Jo Swinson's leadership at every opportunity, even branding the party as *Jo Swinson's Liberal Democrats* on their campaign bus. This decision seemed particularly ill-advised given that her own parliamentary seat was very precarious, an irony not lost in the commentary on Twitter.

An illustration of these risks came when Swinson was asked on ITV if she would consider using nuclear weapons. Her one-word reply was interpreted as far too enthusiastic by many, and she was openly criticised by SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon for answering the question so lightly. Sturgeon's remarks show the inherent risk in embracing the temptation to engage in traditionally masculine politicking. She claimed that "it is sickening to hear this question asked and answered as if it's some kind of virility test and without any context". The use of the word 'virility' in this context shows Sturgeon's disapproval of unthinking masculinised rhetoric, but also serves to undermine Swinson's efforts to present herself as a strong leader by drawing attention to the fact that as a woman she cannot be considered 'virile'. Crucially, Sturgeon's response is also critical of the willingness of news media to portray politics in simplistic and uncomplicated ways.

Male leaders, on the other hand, do not necessarily face the same risks. However, that is not to say that gender is irrelevant in their political

appeal. Boris Johnson's leadership style has proved to be combative and at times aggressive. Many accused him of threatening European Union officials over the withdrawal agreement, for example, while he and his staff also intimidated and coerced his own MPs, expelling those who disagree with him politically. This style of leadership has been characterised by some media commentators as highly problematic consequences of 'toxic masculinity' in politics whereby political cooperation is seen as a weakness rather than as a necessary aspect of national and international politics. A number of journalists, moreover, showed themselves to be willing accomplices in indulging this aspect of Johnson's political persona, with some gleefully reporting an anonymous briefing that Johnson would compare the Labour leader's approach to Brexit to masturbation in a key speech. Central to Johnson's performance of masculinity is his misogyny. There were numerous occasions throughout his first few months as Prime Minister that illustrate this, ranging from the more subtle, such as the revelation that he described political rival David Cameron as a 'Girly-swat' at one end of the spectrum, to the more troubling, such as when police had been called to a 'domestic disturbance' at the home of his partner Carrie Symonds.

Johnson's domestic arrangements are perhaps the riskiest aspect of his gendered political persona, in contrast to other politicians who openly discuss their families. Johnson's history of extra-marital affairs, and consistent refusals to confirm how many children he has fathered, contributes to his perceived lack of trustworthiness for some. It also reinforces his upper-class background, reflecting old-fashioned embarrassment about fathering 'illegitimate' children. The resurfacing of disparaging remarks about single mothers from his days writing for *The Spectator* moreover emphasises the double-standards that he embodies. Coupled with the Jennifer Arcuri scandal, all these factors could have undermined his relationship with potential voters presenting him as out-of-touch and dishonest. Predictably, though Johnson could rely on his most enthusiastic media commentators to dismiss the suggestion that his private life detracts from his suitability to lead. The 2019 campaign reminds us once again that gendered politics is integral to campaigns, and their reporting, which candidates ignore at their own peril.

Press distortion of public opinion polling: what can, or should, be done?

Pollsters were, not unreasonably, pretty content with their performance in calling the result of this election. Barring a little reflection on why YouGov's much-touted MRP poll erroneously showed a narrowing electoral contest, the big beasts of the industry were happy to share the proximity of their final share projections to the actual result. No soul-searching methodological enquiries needed for this election.

But voting intention polls are well developed and very different from political opinion polls that are often used – and abused – by press interests wishing to promote a specific political agenda. We have seen plenty of evidence of this over the last three and a half years, particularly during some of the dramatic political upheavals of 2019 (now, of course, consigned to history). There is a dangerous complacency in assumptions that polls stand as a scientific barometer of public opinion.

A perfect example of the problem emerged in mid-August during the parliamentary Brexit gridlock, when Johnson floated the idea of proroguing Parliament. The crucial political calculation (beyond whether or not it was lawful) was whether it would alienate voters.

Luckily help was at hand. *The Daily Telegraph* – newspaper turned propaganda freesheet for Johnson then and throughout the election campaign – produced stunning evidence that the public were onside their front page headline declared “Public backs Johnson to shut down Parliament for Brexit” (image [here](#)). Predictably, as broadcasters love their front page reviews, this was repeated by *Newsnight*'s Emma Barnett and other newspaper reviewers. Polls are science, right? What's the problem?

In fact there were multiple problems with the poll and the paper's distorted reporting. The headline emerged from a question which invited respondents to agree or disagree with the statement “Boris needs to deliver Brexit by any means, including suspending parliament if necessary, in order to prevent MPs from stopping it”. Not only a double question (which every first year undergraduate knows is methodologically unsound) but cuddly “Boris” rather than PM or Johnson; and an explicit “explanation” that MPs were intent on stopping Brexit rather than preventing a no-deal Brexit.

This inherent question bias was exacerbated by the Telegraph's deliberate distortion of data to produce their dramatic headline. The public's “backing” was deduced by ignoring one in five “don't knows” to produce a “majority” – despite only 44% agreeing with their seriously dubious statement.

This deliberate distortion of apparently scientific surveys to further a newspaper's political agenda is dangerous because it creates momentum – as it is designed to do. Spurious conclusions are woven into broadcast stories rather than

systematically dismantled or, even better, ignored altogether. It is a perfect route for a predominantly right-wing press to offset declining circulations by driving the news agenda online and on screen. And it is dangerous because it deliberately manipulates “the popular will” to fit that publication's narrative.

What can be done? To some extent, the horse has bolted: despite the popular vote of the last 3 elections (2 generals and 1 euro) demonstrating no majority for Johnson's hardest of Brexits, we leave the EU with the myth intact that he is implementing the popular will. But distortions in pursuit of a political agenda will happen again, and the polling industry should take some responsibility for scrutiny.

There is some hope on the horizon. In November, the Market Research Society teamed up with Impress, the small press regulator, to produce a document on “Using surveys and polling data in your journalism”. For publishers that belong to Impress and those polling agencies which are members of the MRS, it provides guidance to best practice.

But there lies the problem. While the MRS takes a dim view of poor survey design and has robust procedures in place for complaints, many pollsters – including ComRes, authors of the Telegraph poll – eschew the MRS for the British Polling Council (BPC). The raison d'être of the BPC is “to ensure standards of disclosure that provide consumers.... with an adequate basis for judging the reliability and validity of the results.” In other words, as long as sampling, questions and data are published and transparent, there is no quality control.

As for the big press publishers, they want nothing to do with an independent regulator set up to follow Leveson's guidelines, and continue to promote their puppet regulator IPSO as a genuine arbiter of press standards. Given its abject failure to implement its own code of practice, it is scarcely likely to find such misbehaviour problematic.

For the moment, polling and publishing industries will continue to take advantage of lax standards. It will be left to responsible broadcasters, academics, and ordinary members of the public, to scrutinise political polls and call out manifestly bogus claims about public opinion.



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The final verdict: patterns of press partisanship



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Election endorsements are important because they represent self-conscious attempts by newspapers to distil and convey their partisan preferences. While acknowledging most titles declare allegiances, it is also important to examine how and whether they qualify this support. Table 1 demonstrates that this was, in press terms, a highly polarised election with the Tory dominated, paid for daily print market overwhelmingly exhorting readers to vote Conservative. But the same figures also reveal that there has been a sharp decline of 25% in hard copy sales since the last, relatively recent election of 2017. If this trend continues it will be interesting to see what remains of the print market in the next election expected in 2024.

Press coverage of the 2019 campaign was characterised by its fierce partisanship. Having relentlessly attacked him in 2017, *The Daily Mail* had been invited by the Labour leader to do so again at the following election. The Mail duly responded with negative coverage that culminated in a frontpage declaration for “Boris”. The Express followed suit with a cover photograph of the Prime Minister captioned “Brexit and Britain in your hands”. The Sun also declared voting Conservative would “Save Brexit” and “Save Britain” from “Red Jez” and his “extremists”. The quality Telegraph emulated the more polemical tone of its counterparts in warning against the election of a ‘Marxist’ government. The Times, the other member of the Tory press, adopted more measured language in acknowledging “Remain minded liberal Conservatives” faced a dilemma before warning the Brexit Party threatened Boris Johnson’s chances of victory.

The five non-Conservative newspapers each took a distinctive editorial line. The *Mirror*, Labour’s only stalwart press supporter, excoriated a ‘lying PM’ as a ‘cheat and charlatan’. Giving lukewarm backing to Labour, the *Guardian* scolded Corbyn’s leadership before concluding the party was “not perfect but progressive”. The anti-Brexit *Financial Times* offered tepid support to the Liberal Democrats, despite their “poor campaign”, because their larger rivals were “populist”. Although very different publications, *The i* and the *Star* both promoted their non-partisanship and encouraged readers to make up their own minds when voting. But the latter couldn’t resist deriding the two main parties as “clowns to the left of us, jokers to the right”.

As part of Loughborough University’s real time audit of national news coverage of the 2019 General Election, all election items were graded according to their positivity and negativity for the main political parties. Figure 1 aggregates the weekly scores for each party when positive and negative print items are combined and weighted by circulation. The size of anti-Labour print media coverage is pronounced and demonstrated by the

large red minus bars’ size. The weekly analysis shows how these intensified throughout the campaign, becoming most evident in the final days of the campaign.

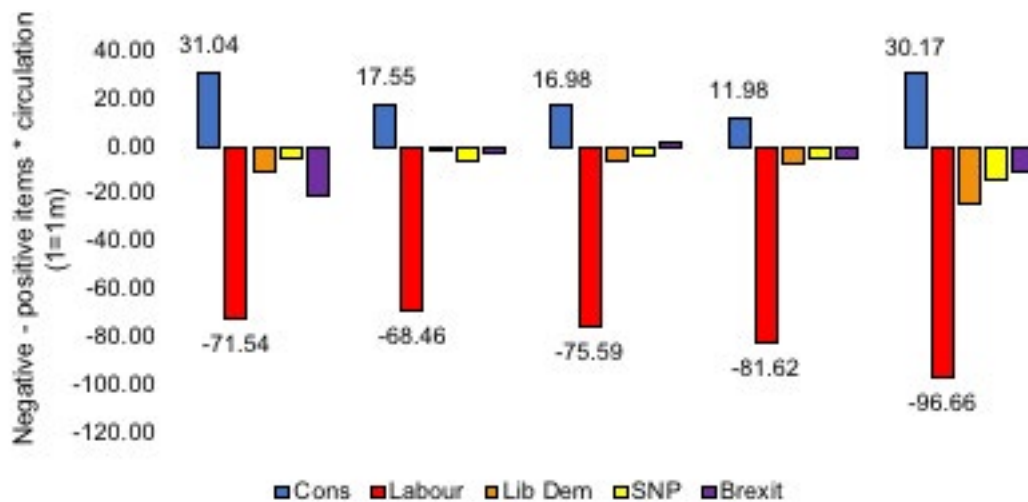
The non-red bars are modest in size because of the relative lack of print interest in other parties. Although Johnson received negative press during the campaign over issues like health, the Conservatives were the only party to enjoy positive coverage throughout the election. Some of this reinforced Johnson’s ‘get Brexit done’ narrative. And whereas print reporting of the 2010 and 2015 elections demonstrated greater interest in potential coalition partners, notably the Liberal Democrats and SNP respectively, there was little commentary about them this time. Like 2017, 2019 was overwhelmingly represented as a binary choice. A huge circulation advantage ensured that if voters bought a newspaper over the counter, they would be more than likely to read pro-Conservative material. While how and whether this factor might have had a bearing on this campaign is one issue, the sharp decline of print sales since 2017 also raises a further intriguing question: will 2019 be the traditional hard copy newspapers’ final meaningful electoral verdict?

Table 1: Daily newspapers' 2019 partisanship with circulations (hard copy in 000s)

Title	2019 (2017)	2019 (2017)	Circulation loss 2017-19
Daily Mirror	Very Strong Labour (Strong Labour)	455 (687)	-34%
Daily Express	Very Strong Conservative (Very Strong Conservative)	298 (386)	-23%
Daily Star	None (None)	289 (438)	-34%
The Sun	Very Strong Conservative (Very Strong Conservative)	1,217 (1,617)	-25%
Daily Mail	Very Strong Conservative (Very Strong Conservative)	1,133 (1,454)	-22%
Daily Telegraph	Very Strong Conservative (Strong Conservative)	309 (467)	-34%
The Guardian	Weak Labour (Moderate Labour)	129 (154)	-16%
The Times	Strong Conservative (Moderate Conservative)	365 (446)	-18%
The i	None (None)	220 (263)	-16%
Financial Times	Very Weak Liberal Democrat (Weak Conservative)	163 (197)	-17%
Totals	Share of endorsements by circulation C 72.5% Lab 12.8% LD 3.6% None 11.1%	4,578 (6,109)	-25%

Audit Bureau of Circulations for November 2019 (April 2017)

**Figure 1: Overall newspaper evaluations
weeks 1 - 5 (weighted by circulation)**



The class war election



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Class war dominated this election. Of course, psephologists, academics, columnists, voters and non-voters will point to multiple reasons to explain the overwhelming Conservative majority: Brexit fatigue, Corbyn's leadership, a bloated Labour manifesto, cultural realignment and media bias. All of these contribute to the 'complex picture' that lies behind the result.

But none of those explanations undermine the fact that the 2019 General Election was won by a party wholly intent on waging war against the (rather modest) redistributory policy proposals of Corbyn's Labour Party. In the face of a climate disaster, public health emergency, education meltdown and housing crisis, the Tories – bank-rolled by hedge fund cash – mobilised their troops to launch an offensive to defend elite power and privilege. This involved both vilifying and ridiculing Labour policies on these issues.

The Sun dubbed the Labour manifesto a "declaration of class war" which would "destroy property rights, the job market and the economy." Fraser Nelson in the *Telegraph* described Labour's environmental proposals to create a low-carbon economy as "class war". Robert Peston asked his viewers on ITV to take a side in "this election's new class war".

It was, however, only Labour's proposals to redistribute resources that were seen in these terms; Tory attacks on public ownership and higher taxes for the rich weren't seen as class war but a necessary defence of incentives for wealth creation.

But this was, most definitely, a class war election. The problem is that the left weren't able to fight this war with the same ruthlessness, visibility and insurgency as their opponents. The Tories flooded Facebook (especially in the last week of the campaign) with ads, 88% of which, according to First Draft, contained misleading claims about the NHS, tax cuts and Labour policies. Their ideological allies in the press, meanwhile, ensured that news coverage of Labour was unremittingly and increasingly negative with even online push notifications skewing heavily against Labour and in favour of the Tories. Billionaire proprietors waged war on behalf of their political representatives.

To what extent did broadcasters, blessed with a privileged viewing platform and the obligation to respect impartiality, rise to the occasion? While they may have been scrupulous in giving the two main parties equal airtime, they weren't quite so balanced in the stories they highlighted. TV news agendas were dominated by Brexit, the economy and taxation (all comfortable issues for Boris Johnson) with health (Labour's preferred topic) coming in fifth and the environment not featuring at all in the top five. Moreover, unencumbered by a responsibility to tell the truth, Johnson simply lied on air about Tory plans to build 40 new hospitals and about Corbyn's threat to scrap MI5 knowing

that by the time the fact checkers got around to challenging their veracity, the damage was already done. Never has 'stopwatch politics' and stilted impartiality so clearly failed to capture the wider issue agenda or to hold elite power to account.

The BBC, due to its high trust ratings and still dominant grip on news consumption in the UK, holds a special responsibility in this regard. Yet this was a disastrous election for the BBC – twice being forced to apologise for misleading editing that showed Johnson in a good light, failing to honour the promise allegedly made to Labour that the prime minister would be scrutinised by Andrew Neil, repeating Tory spin verbatim, highlighting allegations of anti-semitism against Jeremy Corbyn over those of Tory Islamophobia and generally, as Peter Osborne put it, "behaving in a way that favours the Tories".

For example, when Labour revealed documents that showed that the NHS would be part of a trade deal with the US, the BBC's main radio and TV bulletins on the Saturday night before the election led not with a detailed discussion of the allegations themselves but with the 'threat of foreign interference'. The headline for BBC News Online was "PM: We must find source of UK-US trade document leak". Stenography doesn't constitute good journalism at the best of times but during an election, it's particularly pernicious and anti-democratic.

Many weapons are used in class war but media power is a central part of the generals' arsenal. Highlighting systematic media bias is neither conspiratorial (despite what the BBC argues) nor simplistic. Indeed, ignoring bias is precisely one of the privileges of media power (which is why it's perhaps not surprising that the Guardian's article on "five reasons why Labour lost" didn't even mention the media).

Until we address the reasons underlying this bias – including concentrated media ownership, Oxbridge-dominated executives and elite capture – any radical opposition will have to be prepared for sustained vilification and misrepresentation and will need an insurgent movement to face this down. Polarisation is often seen as a dangerous element in today's politics but in a class war, you need to take sides.

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PM: We must find source of UK-US trade document leak

Labour says the documents show the NHS would be "for sale" under a post-Brexit trade deal with the US.

3h | Election 2019

- ▶ Leak is a 'distraction' - Johnson
- ▶ Corbyn defends NHS document



CLASS WAR Jeremy Corbyn announces £75bn pledge to build 150,000 council homes a year paid for by tax on Britain's highest earners

An uncertain future for alternative online media?



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Since 2015, British politics saw not only the emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as a political force, but also the “rise of the alt-left British media”. These online sites, through their significant social media followings, have provided an alternative brand of left-wing news and comment. After Labour’s resounding election defeat in 2019, many will now undoubtedly expect their decline. However, alternative online media exist within a complex media system and closer inspection suggests that predictions about their imminent demise may be premature.

Alternative online media have spent years building their audience and influence. During the 2017 General Election, BuzzFeed claimed that articles by left-leaning sites including *Another Angry Voice*, *The Canary*, *Evolve Politics*, and *Skwawkbox* were being shared more than material produced by MSM sites. Our analysis of Twitter data (see fig. 1) collected during the 2019 campaign indicates that alternative online media have maintained their significant reach. During the campaign, for example, *Evolve Politics* content was retweeted more than 164,500 times, surpassing Guido Fawkes’ total of 154,200. Similarly, *Skwawkbox* and *Another Angry Voice* more than doubled their number of retweets from 2017.

Meanwhile, items about the election campaign on the Facebook pages of *Another Angry Voice*, *Evolve Politics*, and *Skwawkbox* were shared thousands of times each day. One *Another Angry Voice* post received over 19,000 shares (see fig. 2). As our campaign analysis demonstrated, left-leaning sites appeared to reach more users on Facebook than their right wing alternative media equivalents.

But despite their apparent reach, it is difficult to determine their impact on the outcome of either of the two previous elections. It seems unlikely that these sites will now simply disappear, although this reach may decline if those reading and supporting the left-wing sites lose enthusiasm for their particular brand of political news and comment.

In contrast to the UK’s right-leaning mainstream press, alternative online media skew predominately to the left, with the exception of *Conservative Woman*, *Breitbart London* and *Guido Fawkes*. Faced with a UK press system that is consistently hostile towards Labour’s policies and personalities, left-leaning alternative online media function as a “self-perceived corrective”, as they seek to promote an alternative political ideology. As our earlier findings suggest, they adopt a combative tone.

In our view, the presence of these left-leaning alternative media can be understood as a dialectical reaction to a largely right-leaning press and their online influence. While Jeremy Corbyn may be emblematic of the alternative left, he is not a fundamental prerequisite for the alternative media that support a left-wing ideological position. We

anticipate that these sites will now reposition in support of a new leader from the left of the party - and will continue to aggressively promote left-wing partisan politics in order to compete with right-wing alternative media competitors and newspapers.

Critiques and attacks on the MSM were a defining feature of both right and left-leaning alternative media before and during election campaign. In 2017, for example, then *Evolve Politics* editor Matt Turner explained that criticism of the BBC was the site’s largest driver of traffic. During the 2019 election and its aftermath, attacks on the MSM - especially the BBC - were again a significant theme. In recognition of the influence of left wing media, pundits such as Ash Sarkar from Novara Media featured prominently on broadcast media but this exposure may now be in doubt (see fig. 3). We expect alternative online media to continue attacking the MSM, blaming its general failure and political bias for Labour’s election result.

There are two main reasons we expect left-leaning alternative media to continue beyond Jeremy Corbyn’s demise as leader. First and foremost, they are still ideologically opposed to the Conservative government, the coverage of politics on mainstream media and some of the likely contenders for the leadership of the Labour Party. Secondly, they continue to attract many who are disaffected by mainstream politics.

The UK’s left-leaning alternative media must now react to the damaging election result and find a new, post-Corbyn political identity. We believe it is premature to assume they will fold any time soon, since many of the conditions that led to their creation will undoubtedly continue and even intensify under decisions made by Boris Johnson’s Conservative government. The possible abolition of the licence fee and the future of Channel 4 and the BBC, for example, will also undoubtedly attract their attention.



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Figure 1

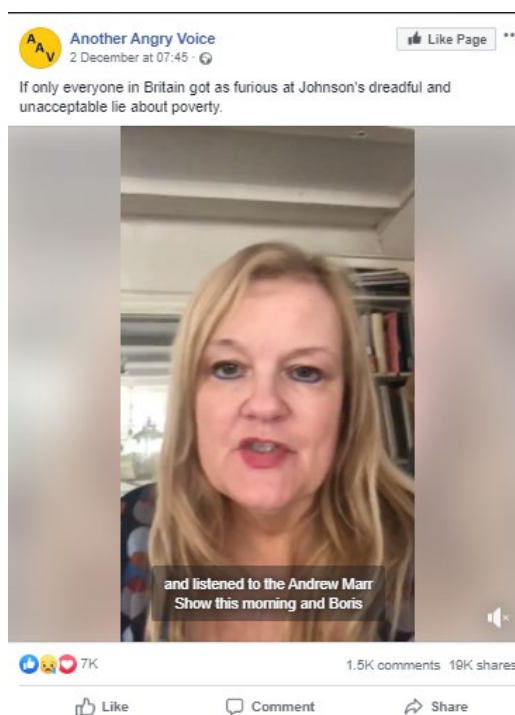
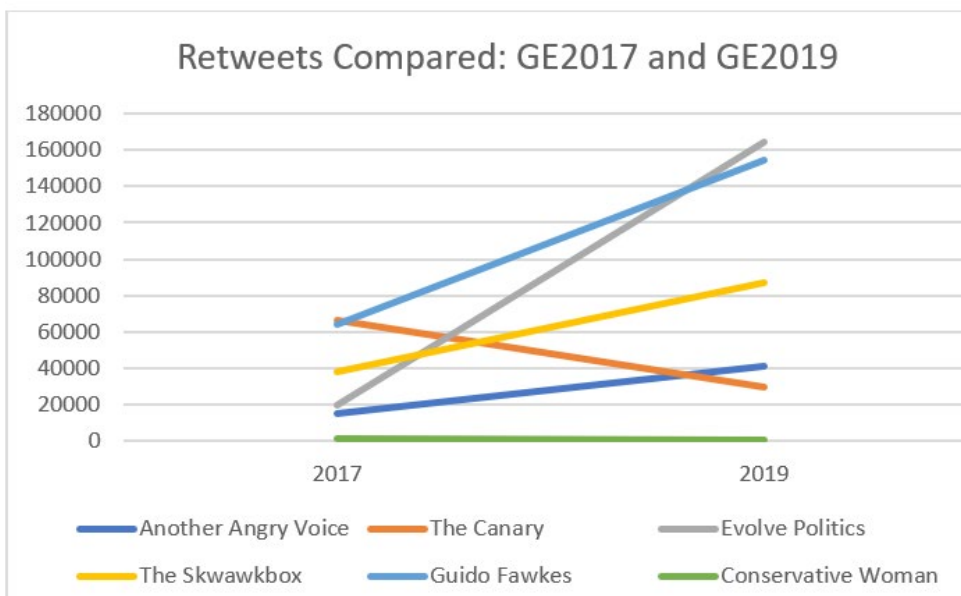


Figure 2

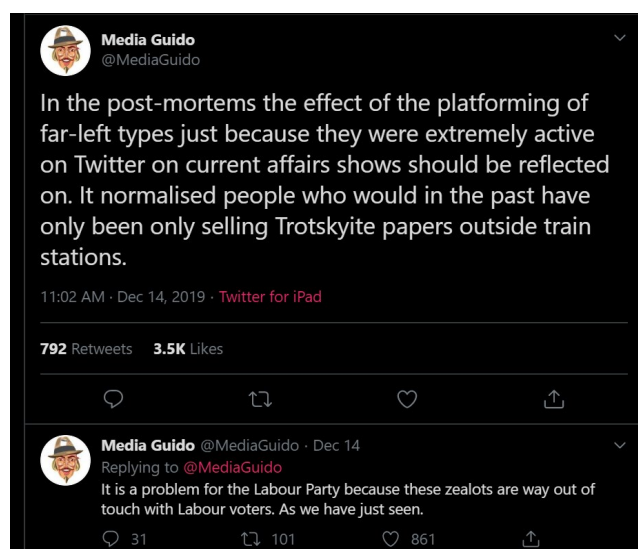


Figure 3



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Personality politics and popular culture

Tune in, turn away, drop out: emotionality and the decision not to stand

As a 2019 General Election became an inevitability, one of the main news stories focused on the MPs who would not be standing. In total, 74 MPs decided not to contest their seats in this election; not a record number by any means, but a significant figure given that this was the third election in only four years. We propose that there were pertinent reasons why those standing down became the specific focus of media attention, and that by readjusting our focus toward those choosing not to campaign as MPs, significant characteristics of the current atmosphere of UK political culture are revealed.

Our title above first refers to the ‘tuning in’ of politicians, not only in the retelling of personalised stories of constituents, but tuning in to their own emotionalities in public debates. Parliament has heard personal testimony from MPs, talking about their own domestic abuse or confessional experiences of abortion. But emotional exposure is risky. When female Labour MPs expressed concerns that the threats they had received echoed Boris Johnson’s own rhetoric on Brexit, he dismissed this as “humbug”, sparking commentary on some of the ‘angriest scenes’ witnessed in the Commons. Abuse of MPs is just one of the reasons they are ‘turning away’ from their parties and parliament. This turning away is a political action in its own right; on a party level we have seen turbulence as MPs leave one party, create new alliances, have the whip removed and join their old adversaries. Amongst this fracturing, others decide to ‘drop out’ entirely.

Into this mix, the related media coverage often provided a platform to probe far beyond the clichéd ‘wanting to spend more time with the family’ mantra. Nicky Morgan cited both public abuse and the fact that she’d never attended her son’s parents’ evenings as her reasons. The BBC came under fire for giving ex-Labour MP Ian Austin leading coverage in his appeal for voters to back Boris Johnson over Jeremy Corbyn as he stepped down as an independent MP. On 6 November, Austin was interviewed on Radio 4’s Today programme by Nick Robinson, who paused and said, “I’ve known you for many years...I hope you don’t mind me saying this, you’re not finding this easy are you? This is quite an emotional day for you.” Inserting his own emotionally-attuned reading of his interviewee’s emotions here served to authenticate Austin’s position.

Heidi Allen is further example of an MP choosing to turn away. Announcing her decision on 29 October, she noted that the abuse suffered as an MP had been “utterly dehumanising” and that her decision to stand down was “heartbreaking”. The emotionality evidenced here raises key questions about abuse and a broken parliament. Allen’s movements – from the Conservative Party, to leading Change UK, and finally to the Liberal Democrats – exemplified, for some, a political

inauthenticity. Yet, viewed another way, what such movements may reveal is a clear sense of political homelessness.

Allen, of course, is not alone in moving parties and the rise in MPs turning away from one party and turning toward another, is politically prescient. Perhaps what we can read through such shifts is a broader and more critical change in UK political culture – an unmooring from party allegiance and a realignment toward personal or, more accurately, persona-based constancy. If this reading is right, then the place of emotionality is central to this new order.

While emotion and strength of feeling have always been understood as a consistent marker of party politics, the space that emotion now takes up in the mediation of contemporary political life can be understood as a point of difference. In the context of those MPs standing down, emotion and the performance of it, has shaped their public personas and is one of the key contexts through which agenda-setting, image-building and image-breaking take place. Despite the public discourse around separation between political and ordinary lives however, perhaps what Allen’s case exemplifies is the emotional proximity rather than the distance between MPs and citizens. When a traditional structure is undergoing seismic change in shape, space and cultural place, those who are most vulnerable are likely to be the first to be swept away. In nominating her exhaustion, Allen implies that she can’t ‘hang on’.

Following their research into the intimidation of elected representatives, Sarah Childs and Rosie Campbell pertinently asked: “Who would want to be an MP, and especially a woman or BAME MP?” The paradox is that, as with the 2017 election, a record number of female MPs have been elected again. Labour will have more female than male MPs. In this new parliament, we wait to see whether the new contingent of representatives together cultivate a shift in parliamentary culture, and how they employ emotional registers in doing so.



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Last fan standing: Jeremy Corbyn supporters in the 2019 General Election



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Over the course of the last three General Elections I have sought to document how fan-like engagements have increasingly shaped political participation. In 2015 I highlighted the centrality of polysemy in political messaging in FPTP-electoral systems; a theme echoed in the content-light slogans of the 2019 Conservative campaign focusing on process (getting Brexit *done*) rather than substance (what Brexit *is*). Two years later, I suggested that the affective investments in Corbyn among supporters that facilitated a particular reading of Labour's 2017 defeat likely spelled future electoral calamity.

In the 2019 General Election campaign I, alongside my colleagues Benjamin Litherland, Joseph Smith and Niki Cheong, took to the field for in-depth interviews with 47 Jeremy Corbyn supporters across the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East Midlands. While my 2017 prediction proved accurate, our interim findings suggests that the grounds on which it was made failed to sufficiently account for important differences between supporters.

The decline of the Labour leader's popularity and capacity to serve as fan object since the heydays of Glastonbury revellers' 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn' chants documented in BES panel studies since 2017 coincided with a period in which the 'constructive ambiguity' (in other words polysemy) of Labour's Brexit position grew unsustainable. Already strongly disliked by 2016 Leave voters (nearly 60% of whom rated Corbyn 0 out of 10 in the latest BES data) Corbyn's wider appeal had been much more strongly tied to the Remain cause than Labour frontbenchers past and present have been willing to admit.

Notably, many of the Corbyn supporters we interviewed described the 2016 EU membership referendum as catalyst of their engagement in politics and subsequent support of Jeremy Corbyn as disappointed Remainers. Those who by remaining Corbyn supporters were included in our sample, negotiated this seeming contradiction through strategies of textual selection and distinct reading positions: from those unaware of Corbyn's Euroscepticism to those interpreting his recent conversion to offering a People's Vote as a manifestation of him upholding principles of fairness. Others saw the values that had driven their Remain support translated into an agenda that they felt was advanced by Corbyn beyond the question of EU membership, namely questions of fairness, greater equality and the protection of the NHS. While these strategies succeeded in maintaining an affective bond for our interviewees, to many former Corbyn supporters they did not.

Yet more significant for the future of the Labour Party and to a broader reflection on the impact of the fanisation of political participation is the recognition of widely diverging practices,

readings and affective investments among supporters. The clusters of different fan groups that emerged in our research map closely onto fan groups across the spectrum from audiences to petty producers identified by Abercrombie and Longhurst: fans whose media use is generally broad (and often still broadcast-centred), as is their fan object (commonly being the Labour Party, translating to emotionally invested support of the current leader); a second group whose fan object is defined more narrowly (specifically Corbyn rather than Labour) and whose media engagement is more specific and tied to social networks both online and offline; and enthusiasts whose fandom is embedded in a tight social network through organisations such as Momentum and the use of niche media such as The Canary or Novara Media; and whose fan objects shifts towards their own activity, as was reflected in the focus on friendships and campaigning achievements in Momentum's first reaction to Labour's defeat. Crucially, while all groups share an affective bond with Corbyn as fan object and regard their readings as reinforced by being part of a broader movement, their reading and understanding of shared terms – and with it their visions of the future they strive for – is widely divergent. While almost all participants described themselves as socialists their definitions of socialism ranged from 'being sociable' and caring about others (among the most casual fans), via broadly social democratic ideas of a stronger welfare state, to support for expansive forms of nationalisation coming closest (if not close) to an orthodox reading of socialism among some Momentum members.

Rather than a sense of a shared positive agenda, what tied Corbyn supporters together was thus a shared dislike of the Conservative party and Boris Johnson in particular, much as, it seems safe to assume, such anti-fandom of Jeremy Corbyn drove the Conservative vote to a yet higher degree. In the UK's post-referendum participatory political culture antipathy and anti-fandom hence function as key denominators around which fans and voters coalesce – a theme that not only marked Corbyn's rise (with his initial attraction to most respondents being not any of the three other, better known leadership candidates) and fall from power, but likely to shape the Labour leadership election, too.

Linguistic style in the Johnson vs Corbyn televised debates of the 2019 General Election campaign

The two head-to-head televised debates between Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson in GE2019 (the first on ITV on 19th of November and the second on BBC on 6th December) offer an opportunity to examine the linguistic strategies and tactics each leader deployed to convey their message. The genre of the televised debate is one in which politicians must perform with strength and authenticity in order to be perceived as the winner. While more sophisticated augmentative models of consensus and reasoned debate are no doubt available, the televised debate continues to be conducted in competitive terms.

Gains can be made in televised debates by simply occupying the floor more than an opponent, and this relies on interactional power. First, a politician needs to speak for longer than an opponent and Johnson achieved this, speaking for approximately eight minutes more than Corbyn across both debates (three minutes more in the ITV debate and five minutes more in the BBC debate). This gain is significant as the length of speaking turns is strictly controlled by the moderators (Julie Etchingham in the first debate and Nick Robinson in the second). Johnson gained time by resisting the moderators and breaking the timing rules. This can be seen right from the first one-minute turn of the first debate where Corbyn speaks first for just under 60 seconds, and Johnson speaks for 70 seconds. Johnson resists four appeals by the moderator to stop speaking and gains ten extra seconds. This pattern is repeated throughout the debates, with Johnson ignoring and resisting the moderators' enforcement of the timing rules and accruing time for himself.

Speakers can also gain the floor by violating the opponent's speaking turn and both Corbyn and Johnson interrupt each other. However, Johnson interrupts Corbyn much more, and more successfully while Corbyn interrupts rarely and he allows Johnson to continue speaking afterwards. Johnson's interruptions are not only much more frequent but also more intrusive and consistently wrest the speaking turn away from Corbyn. Johnson also dominates both debates throughout by taking the moderator's role and directing the proceedings himself by asking Corbyn questions, particularly about Corbyn's stance on Brexit. This tactic has many advantages as it allows Johnson to achieve the interactional upper hand by taking charge and pointing to the opponent's weaknesses, but it also serves as an evasion. In both debates Johnson responds to critical questions about his own policies by immediately directing critical and derisive questions towards Corbyn.

Apart from interaction and the floor, televised debates are also characterised by adversarial language and personal attacks. Here Johnson seems to have a consistent *ad hominem* approach to Corbyn by portraying his leadership style as

"dither and delay", his ideas as "crackpot" and his policies as "Bermuda triangle type stuff" saying "it'll be little green men next". Johnson also uses single-word interjections like "nonsense" with accompanying theatrical shrugging gestures and head-shaking to undermine Corbyn's points. In contrast, Corbyn does not use personal attacks at all but only attacks Johnson on his political record: on promises he made during the Brexit referendum campaign and on his plans for possible trade deals involving the NHS.

Corbyn's consensual style in these debates and also in other adversarial speech events such as Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) with Theresa May is highly unusual. He not only contradicts the accepted confines of the genre, but also defies gendered expectations as the competitive displays are stereotypically viewed as masculine. Conversely, Johnson, like Donald Trump in debates with Hilary Clinton in the 2016 US election, performs an overtly hyper-masculine version of adversarial interactional dominance. In practice, both men and women political leaders draw on a range of adversarial and consensual styles but in this case neither Johnson's or Corbyn's two extremes seem to be the most successful approach to adversarial speech events. Alternatively, these debates can be performed with warmth and humour, as shown by Nicola Sturgeon in the General Election debates of 2015, who used interruption, adversarial quips and wisecracks to great effect while avoiding some of the negative aggression of direct personal attacks.

Johnson's interactional dominance of the head-to-head debates of GE2019 gave him more of the interactional floor than Corbyn, and his personal attacks showed Corbyn in a negative light. Although Corbyn arguably gave better answers to some of the 'quick-fire' questions, he was framed as the weaker participant by Johnson's adversarial stance. This shows how carefully politicians must manage the combination of their own personal approach with the demands of the speech event genre. Whether in PMQs or televised debates the gains and losses of adversarial speech seem to be preserved in the proceedings and formats of the events. It is therefore possibly too risky for a leader to reject adversarial norms without either changing those formats or developing more sophisticated strategies to deflect and soften their negative effects.



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Order! Order! The Speaker, celebrity politics and ritual performance



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“It’s a circus, isn’t it? But, well, a fun circus. And the best thing about this circus is the speaking master: John Bercow.”

On October 27, the Dutch satirical news show *Zondag met Lubach* spent a 7-minute item on the popularity of the Speaker of the House of Commons and his omnipresence in the Dutch news media. Throughout 2019, Bercow was the object of much press coverage, was interviewed on television and appeared in a live talk show twice. Clips that showed him screaming “Order! Order!” regularly popped up on television and went viral on news sites and social media. The phrase became an emblem for the particularities of British politics. It was amusing to European audiences but at the same time a symbolic marker of the otherness of the UK.

Bercow’s “Order! Order!” became a daily incantation that afforded an international public to relate to the political spectacle in Westminster. However, it also became the epitome of increasingly desperate attempts to avert political chaos in an ongoing political pandemonium. Both through its literal meaning and its repetitiveness it provided ritual stability to a political process that became increasingly hard to comprehend in the media coverage of the Brexit debates.

Providing order in Parliament and safeguarding its procedures and rules of debate is the main task of the Speaker. He needs to assure that “the rules laid down by the House for the carrying on of its business are observed”, as the House states itself. The function of Speaker is therefore key to the democratic process. When accepting office, Speakers resign from their party and during elections they do not campaign on political issues but stand as the “Speaker seeking re-election”. As laid down in the regulation of the House: “The Speaker must be above party political controversy and must be seen to be completely impartial in all public matters”.

The Speaker does not take a stand on political issues and has merely a procedural, ceremonial and ritual function. He needs to *perform* the written and unwritten rules of parliamentary politics. By using ritual phrasing and performing ritual acts he safeguards the integrity of the democratic process without interfering in the political content. We could therefore hypothesise that public attention for the role and person of the Speaker, especially in politically turbulent times, is limited, and even more so compared to political leaders.

However, the extensive media coverage from the Westminster theater has turned the Speaker into a lead actor on the political stage. Bercow became a celebrity politician.

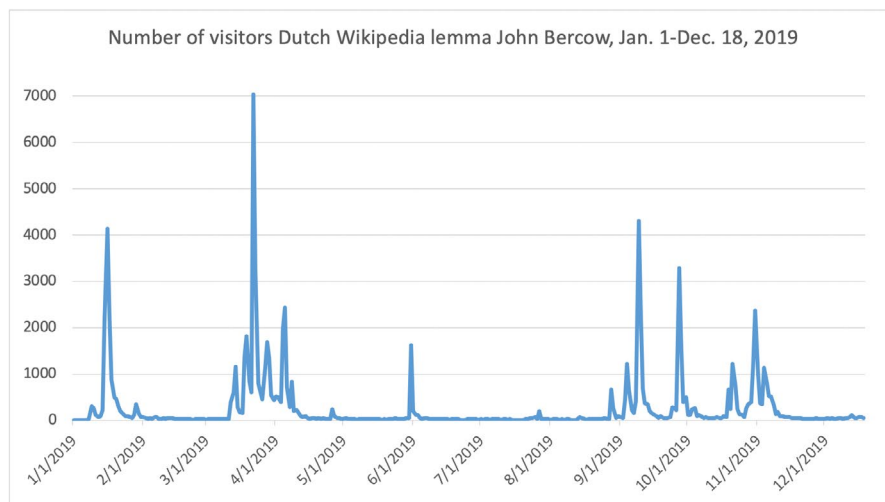
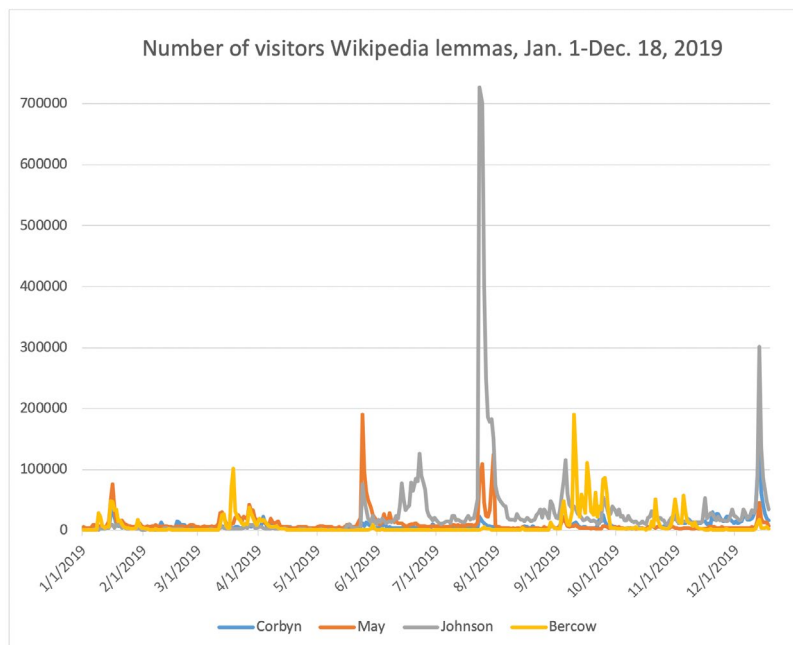
When we take the number of visits to the English-language Wikipedia lemma about Bercow as a proxy for public interest, we see that throughout 2019 it attracted on many days a similar

amount of visits as the lemmas of Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson – and regularly more. There is a clear relation with events in which the Speaker interfered, such as Bercow deciding that the House could not vote twice on an agreement between the government and the EU. Numbers then spiked to 51,276 visitors on October 21. Moreover, and even more when examining the number of visitors to lemmas about Bercow in other European languages, there is also a clear relation with press coverage. After Bercow had been a guest in the Dutch talk show *Jinek* in April and September, for example, there was a steep rise in the visitors to the Dutch language Wikipedia page.

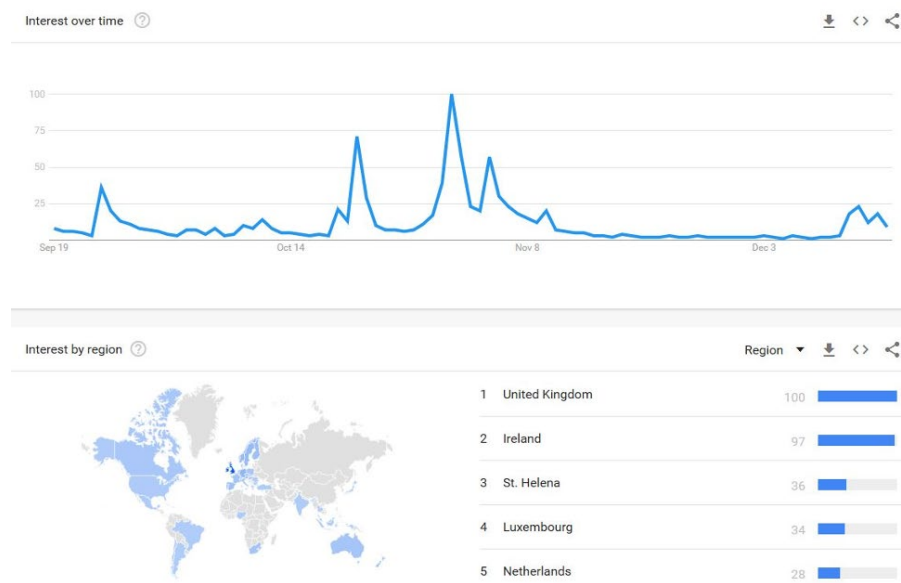
Similar patterns are observed in the data in Google Trends. Although these don’t provide absolute numbers, it allows for the analysis of the relative importance of search terms. Moreover, it gives insight in the geographical distribution of search queries. This shows that searches for Bercow are more numerous in countries in which there was also more press coverage. The Netherlands, again, scores particularly high here. The Dutch public broadcaster NOS even reported in April about Bercow’s fame under the headline: “Mr. Speaker (from order, order!) attraction at Schiphol”.

The substantial public attention for Bercow on the one hand aligns with a trend towards celebrity politics and representing politics as a spectacle. It provided foreign media with a narrative and an angle that appealed to a mass audience. The Speaker, and the phrase “Order! Order!” in particular, thus became a recurring trope in an unfolding and – at least for an outside audience – increasingly chaotic and incomprehensible political situation. Coverage was colored by the irony of the outside observer describing an unfolding tragedy.

The public attention for the Speaker also points to the importance of rituals in politics. They not only provide stability to the political process, but also provides something to hold on to in political reporting. Rituals function to produce order out of chaos – even where order is hard to find.



3. Google searches for “John Bercow” between Sept. 19 and Dec. 18, 2019 (Google Trends)



What is Boris Johnson?



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Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn have dominated the media coverage of the election, with each receiving 30+% of the coverage in the last days of the campaign. Much of the coverage of Corbyn was negative, demonising him in any number of ways (e.g. ‘Cor-bin’ in *The Sun* or ‘Apologists for Terror’ in the *Daily Mail*), but what of the Prime Minister? How was Johnson portrayed, beyond the faked familiarity of ‘Boris’ and ‘BoJo’?

Matthew Wood and his colleagues used Boris Johnson’s London mayoral campaign and career to illustrate their notion of the ‘everyday celebrity politician’. This figure, they argued, was a product of an era of anti-politics and of the new modes of communication made available via social media and other non-traditional media platforms. The everyday celebrity politician evinced an image of ‘normality’, ‘spontaneity’ and ‘authenticity’.

This analysis seemed to capture exactly the strategy adopted by the Conservative Party and Johnson’s advisers. The pictures of Johnson pulling pints in a pub, delivering milk, or operating factory machinery, together with the predictable primary school and hospital photos, all served to represent him in ‘everyday’ contexts.

The celebrity dimension was captured in the party election broadcasts that bookended the campaign. The 12 Questions video that began the campaign has had, according to YouTube, more than 250,000 views. (The best viewed Labour equivalent, *Mean Tweets with Jeremy Corbyn*, received 86,000 views). *12 Questions* borrows from *Vogue’s 73 Questions*. Both evince an air of spontaneity as the subject responds to a series of serious and not-so-serious enquiries. It begins as it goes on: “Hey, Boris, you alright? ... What’s been on your mind today?” He is then asked about why he’s called the election - whether he likes Marmite (“yes”), what challenges face the country, and which is his favourite band (The Rolling Stones) - while he wanders a corridor and makes himself tea.

The campaign ended with a parody of a scene from *Love Actually* (itself a parody of Bob Dylan’s video for ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ from 1965). Instead of Andrew Lincoln on the doorstep, confessing his love to Keira Knightley with a series of hand-drawn posters and a cassette of Christmas carols, Johnson serenades a voter with his promise to “get Brexit done”. It was viewed 440,000 times in the two days before December 12th. Here was Johnson, playing the lovable rogue, framed by the glamour of the movie world.

Both of these videos, in their different ways, represented Johnson, in the words of James Brassett and Alex Sutton, as the “world’s first self-satirising politician” - a claim further underlined by the sight of Johnson driving a JCB through a wall of polystyrene bricks to convey his determination to get Brexit done.

The self-satirical pose provided a device for

eluding criticism, and for securing media endorsement. Leo McKinstry wrote in the *Daily Express* of “the jovial atmosphere inspired by the Prime Minister”, of Johnson’s ability to “[bring] smiles” and his “unique capacity to amuse and entertain the public”. Other journalists translated his style into some notion of ‘authenticity’ that established his credentials as both a representative of his electorate and a leader of them.

Brassett and Sutton quote the TV and film satirist Armando Iannucci saying that politicians “no longer act like real versions of themselves. Instead, they come over as replicants of an idealised, fictional version of what they think a politician should be. They perform politics rather than practice policy ... We’re left watching an entertainment rather than participating in a state of affairs”. It is a description that fits both Johnson and his representation in this campaign - the everyday, self-satirising celebrity politician.

But there is more to be said. First, in adopting the ‘everyday’ approach, Johnson was refusing the kind of superstar celebrity persona adopted by Donald Trump, whose political style has been compared to that of rock stars or stand-up comedians. And second, there is the question of what kind of entertainer or entertainment Johnson is borrowing to confect his everyday persona. To recall *Love Actually*, it seems as if the plan is for Johnson to channel the humility and charm of Hugh Grant’s fictional PM, although, to some, surprised by his appearance on their doorstep, he might more resemble Grant’s sleazy villain from *Paddington 2*.

Creating Boris: Nigel Farage and the 2019 election

At the end of his big BBC interview with Nigel Farage on 4 December, Andrew Neil thanked his guest, turned to the camera, and castigated Boris Johnson for evading scrutiny. “There is, of course, still one [leader interview] to be done”, said Neil, before listing a long list of “questions of trust” that he wished to put to the elusive Prime Minister. He concluded: “There is no law, no Supreme Court ruling, that can force Mr Johnson to participate in a BBC leader’s interview. But the Prime Minister of our nation will, at times, have to stand up to President Trump, President Putin, [and] President Xi of China. So, it’s surely not expecting too much that he spends half an hour standing up to me”.

It was a powerful set-piece, by a big beast of the BBC who saw his own reputation as a fearsome interviewer grow amid the collective breakdown of his employer, and quickly became canonised as one of the defining moments of a fraught election campaign. Yet, as a political punch, it didn’t leave a mark on the Prime Minister, and it almost completely overshadowed the interview with Farage, in which Neil came out fighting but which the Brexit Party leader and celebrity politician par excellence won on points.

Neil’s opening line: “Nigel Farage. This election should have been your finest hour. Instead, you’ve barely got a walk-on part. What went wrong?”

A little later: “You’re going nowhere. You’re marginalised, irrelevant in this election”.

Later still: “Just after the European elections you were puffed up enough to talk about a complete realignment of British politics. Now you might not win a single seat and you’re not even standing yourself. It was complete hubris, wasn’t it?”

Neil kept swinging, piling pressure on to Farage, whose vulnerabilities had been increasing in previous weeks. Having taken the controversial decision not to run as an MP and having stood down 317 Brexit Party candidates in key constituencies to give the Conservative Party clear runs, Farage should have been reeling. He had also reportedly fallen out with his benefactor, Arron Banks, over party strategy. And just hours before the Neil interview, Farage had been “humiliated” as four Brexit Party MEPs had left the party and advocated that voters back the Tories, amid polls that were moving in the wrong direction for Farage’s party.

Yet, the only point during the interview at which Farage looked vaguely rattled was when Neil read out some racist quotes from Brexit Party candidates, to which Farage parried, countered, and moved on. And despite what at first glance seemed like a terrible election result for the Brexit Party, their winning not a single seat, Farage emerged unbowed. Fuelled by a celebrity persona that far exceeds Westminster, Farage understands power in the age of social media in ways that most other politicians don’t, and is playing an

extra-parliamentary long game where he manipulates the media and other institutions into winning the game for him.

Having forced David Cameron into calling the 2016 EU referendum, and now having re-shaped the Conservative Party (“We set out to make the Conservative Party conservative again - and it’s job done”, he said), Farage’s influence has, over the last generation, outstripped that of pretty much every elected politician in the country.

“Every party I lead shifts the centre of gravity in British politics in a very dramatic way”, he told Neil, when confronted with his own electoral failure. To an audience in Doncaster on the eve of the election he said: “If we hadn’t set The Brexit Party up, Mrs May would still be Prime Minister, Brexit would be stuck in the weeds, and a second referendum would virtually be upon us by now. We reset the political agenda... in a very dramatic way and we have dragged the Tory party kicking and screaming into a different position”. To Neil: “What we did in a sense was to create Boris Johnson”.

Not many people, surely, would be proud of such a thing, but for Farage the means justified the ends, as they had done in the past. It was also another way of cultivating his transatlantic bromance with President Trump. Whether he inadvertently overstepped the mark in creating a Tory monster with an unexpectedly large majority – one which may, under its own opportunistic leader, now pivot towards a One Nation position – remains to be seen. But Farage is not going anywhere. “I’ve spent 25 years trying to get us out of Europe. It looks like I might spend about the next 25 years trying to reform our political system. But I won’t be going away”. So said the most influential electoral loser of the modern political era.



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Boris the clown: the effective performance of incompetence



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As Jeffrey Alexander argues, we tend to measure the success of a political performance by its authenticity. There are three key challenges to achieving this that Johnson has so far in his political career solved particularly well by stepping in the footsteps of other populists. And the 2019 election crystallised these populist solutions.

First, a politician cannot perform a character, as an actor may, that he leaves behind him when he steps off stage. He must be seen to be at one with his persona. At the same time, he must appeal to a media environment that feeds on spectacle and soundbites and is forever watching to see whether he remains consistent in, and at ease with, every situation – from formal parliamentary debates to eating bacon sandwiches.

Populists have found a solution to this challenge: they bring what the sociologist Erving Goffman termed their otherwise private backstage character onto the front stage. Johnson's bumbling, clownish performance of non-professionalism and communicative incompetence does just this through means of symbolic production such as hairstyle, hesitation ("erh-erh-erh") and an ever-present self-ironic smirk. And, as Jeremy Vine recently related, this is a studied performance of incompetence. Such a persona may not fit the norms and formality of political institutions. But, like other populists, Johnson has made this discord between performative form and context his very message: the political system and establishment need shaking up! Norm breaking has become an act of rebellion against formality and political professionalisation. It exposes and delegitimises the scripted political correctness of the Janus-faced, Machiavellian elite for what it is – more insincere masquerading, hiding the truth from public view! In the same sweep, it delegitimises any social powers that might curb the populist performance of *The Truth*. For Johnson, this was until recently parliament. The delegitimation of such power structures that stood in the way of the people's will in turn gave him a mandate to remove the obstacles to better control his performative resources.

Second, an authentic performance requires the audience to psychologically identify with the performed persona so they become receptive to the political actor's message. Johnson's backstage persona allowed him to identify as one of the ordinary people and not a member of the establishment. Somehow rows with girlfriends, questionable favouritism in his relationship with American businesswoman Jennifer Arcuri, unknown numbers of legitimate and illegitimate children, and other divergences from the path of righteousness only reinforced the audience's ability to project themselves onto his otherwise indeterminate and malleable persona. In any story, it is easier to identify with a flawed hero.

The typically populist binary of the good, ordinary people versus the evil, deceptive elite served to polarise and homogenise. But the good people in this divide consisted of a heterogeneous mix of conservatives, non-conservative Brexit voters and anti-Labour voters who would never agree on a left- or right-wing solution to current social problems. 'One Nation Conservatism' became as malleable an ideological platform as Johnson's own character, promising everybody what they wanted, from public service spending to curbing immigration; it morphed into 'The People's Government'. Johnson thereby replaced an ideologically coherent utopian vision with a mythical past that we can supposedly 'go back to' through the gateway of Brexit. And we had better go back to the future quickly – no dither and delay! – as the impatience of populist time dictates.

Third, a successful political performance demands that the audience collectively invest their affect. Johnson could not easily appeal to hope and passion, which require a shared, forward-looking idea that unites citizens. And so instead he appealed to reactionary or backward-looking emotions – anger against a deceiving elite; fear of a scapegoated 'other'; a nostalgic longing for a mythical Great Britain; and, as Candida Yates recently argued, pleasure in being allowed to feel resentment.

Johnson, like most populists, may not have a consistent ideology. His performance, however, enacts a level of consistency between its form and content that populists achieve particularly well. It brings his message into being through the disruption of democratic form, which becomes a pleasure that needs no longer be guilty. And so the good populist performance showcases its undermining of the structures and norms of liberal democracy as we know it and frees the performer of previous restraints. But Johnson's ideologically blank character, of course, does not reveal to us to what ends he will direct his newfound powers.

Political humour and the problem of taking Boris seriously

When Donald Trump ran for president in 2016, his billionaire tech supporter Peter Thiel scolded the media for taking Trump's outrageous speeches literally. Thiel's theory was that "a lot of voters who vote for Trump take Trump seriously but not literally". The worry for the Conservatives going in to the 2019 UK General Election was that voters would take Boris Johnson neither seriously nor literally. For Boris was essentially a comic persona before becoming Prime Minister, having used humour to distinguish himself from his political peers. Literalness is hardly his forte either – he extended the Brexit negotiating deadline despite promising to die in a ditch before doing so. Hence the challenge he faced when campaigning in the role of serious statesman was whether his carefully crafted reputation as a joker would be an electoral asset or a liability.

Charming the Conservative Party membership into handing him the keys to 10 Downing Street was nothing compared with the task of winning enough swing voters to gain a parliamentary majority. The general election was thus the acid test for the Boris method of trying to be taken seriously while laughing off any criticism. One bad omen was the ITV studio audience openly mocking Johnson's response when pressed on his relationship with the truth. By conspicuously avoiding an interview with the fearsome Andrew Neil, Boris betrayed the limits of his ability to appear as a composed public performer.

What the election result ultimately demonstrated is the limited importance of being earnest in what has been dubbed a Berlusconi-fied public sphere. The post-referendum political climate in the UK has been marked by high levels of cynicism and distrust. Professional integrity, expertise, and independence of individuals and institutions alike have been impugned for the sake of point-scoring in the battle to settle unfinished arguments about whether Brexit is the right solution for a badly divided Britain.

Seen in this context, the issue of Johnson's problematic relationship with the truth – he lost a court case effectively brought on the grounds he misled the Queen – is revealing about the true political cost of being ridiculed. Boris did not suffer really as the butt of a thousand jokes from friends and foes alike at home as well as abroad. That brand recognition got him elected mayor of London and was no hindrance to leading the UK's diplomatic service as Foreign Secretary, before eventually unseating Theresa May as Prime Minister. Rather, in the words of the great satirical novelist Jonathan Coe, the greatest trick Boris Johnson ever played was to "become his own satirist". Humour was Boris' strategy for rising to the top; it was a calculated means of deflection designed to ensure that others laugh with him and go gentle on his glaring mistakes, untruths, or moral failings.

Johnson's cautiously rationed public performances during the campaign suggest he was not seeking to rely too much on playing the fool to win. Yet his successful weaponization of political humour was always available to be deployed at will. Time and again, Jeremy Corbyn and other Labour figures quoted Johnson's own words – culled from the stream of consciousness journalism that rewarded the Prime Minister handsomely – at him. But for so many voters this was water off a duck's back; they did not expect comedy Boris to write seriously and were puzzled about taking offence after the fact. Of course, it is no coincidence that the rise of populism in the West is nested within the "culture wars" over the right to cause offence, especially by breaking the supposed taboo of political correctness. Brexit itself is in many ways an extension of this struggle to arbitrate acceptable political discourse, as illustrated by the expression "it's not racist to talk about immigration".

In comedy as in politics, issues of power are never far from the surface. By laughing about some of his weaknesses – something the extremely serious and at times petulant Jeremy Corbyn was incapable of doing – Johnson turned comedy in to the currency of his political power. Corbyn turned out to be the perfect, if unwitting, foil: the straight guy in the 2019 electoral double act. The more the Labour leader could be attacked for his moral seriousness and literal-mindedness, the easier it was for Johnson to escape accountability on those fronts with the complicity of a media ecosystem that lapped it all up. In this way the use of humour was a central plank of the strategy for winning an electoral mandate to undertake the serious business of Brexit. What comes next, however, is bound to be less funny. Not because the stakes are higher, but rather because it is harder to turn the details of fisheries policy or level playing field requirements in to comic material needed to distract from the consequences of Johnson's choices.



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Joking: uses and abuses of humour in the Election campaign



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Humour can be a powerful tool in both political communication and resistance. Joking articulates dissent in a way that disarms opponents, and can provide a protected space to raise risky concepts. A funny idea can spread like wildfire, its inherent enjoyableness uniting support around its core message.

It seems that political parties have not yet mastered the craft of comedy. Witness the Liberal Democrats' short-lived puppet gag: a pair of videos satirising Johnson and Corbyn which were released online then removed from view after they met with virulent criticism, including from within the party's own support base. Johnson's joking has often been controversial: sometimes cited as highly appealing to voters, his sense of humour has also brought him accusations of unstatesmanlike behaviour, 'dog-whistling' and bigotry. Humour is widely theorised as a way for minority and marginalised perspectives to challenge the dominant and powerful, so we are perhaps inherently suspicious of top-down approaches to joking.

In this Election, the more captivating uses of humour were to be found in the grassroots campaigns which sought not to serve power and officialdom, but to tease, jab and question it. The Prime Minister's constituency, Uxbridge and South Ruislip, was one target of the Votey McVoteface campaign, which encouraged itinerant boaters to choose marginal constituencies as the place to register their vote. The strategy was extended to sofa-surfers and others of no fixed address. The campaign's name mirrors an act of collective mischief in which the public voted to christen a polar research ship RSS Boaty McBoatface. In referencing this gag, the Votey team could reasonably hope to replicate that spirit of collective comedic action. No data is currently available to determine whether a significant number of boaters really did participate; certainly they did not succeed in overturning Johnson's majority. It seems likely, though, that the campaign's good use of humour was an important factor in gaining excellent mainstream publicity (from the Guardian, i news and BBC, among others).

Johnson's constituency was also the target of several candidates who stood either as a joke, or using humorous names and costumes to draw attention to a marginal position or issue. These included Lord Buckethead (a recurrent character this time appropriated for the Monster Raving Loony Party), Count Binface (who shares a well-publicised personal rivalry with Buckethead), Yace 'International Time Lord' Yogenstein and Bobby Elmo Smith. None of these candidates made a significant dent in Johnson's 52.6% vote share. The joke candidates' modest impacts ranged from 125 votes for Buckethead to a miniscule 8 votes for Elmo, in comparison to Johnson's 25,351. It is easy to dismiss these apparently flippant candidacies as

an irrelevant, ineffective nuisance. This, though, would disregard a significant tradition of protest.

The nomination of joke candidates is a political tactic with its own history. Examples include the Yippies' nomination of Pigasus (an actual pig) for President of the USA in 1968 and the cat that polled well for a Siberian mayoral post in 2015. Putting animals up for election, like the positing of a fictional persona, asserts that conventional candidates have fallen into contempt. Usually operating with tiny budgets and minimal campaign teams, joke candidates get attention through imagination and mischief. Receiving a negligible number of votes, they do not generally threaten to topple traditional candidates nor electoral systems. This is not truly their purpose. Rather, they function as a small but notable presence, demonstrating and critiquing the operation of power.

The formal campaign in Uxbridge and South Ruislip was largely discussed as a two-horse race between Johnson and the Labour candidate Ali Milani, but media attention also went to the Buckethead vs Binface dispute. Although the tone of Johnson's victory speech at his constituency was triumphant, the pomp of the occasion was certainly called into question by the theatricality of this alternative contest. Buckethead was positioned directly behind the podium as the Returning Officer read the results, so his reactions were televised. As Binface's result was read out, Buckethead conspicuously turned to face him, directing his audience's attention to this specific rivalry. Buckethead jeeringly held up both middle fingers at Binface as his own victory was confirmed. So, the public were presented with a parodic parallel two-horse race, characterised by pettiness, personal animosity and narcissism, which mirrored some possible, cynical interpretations of the formal campaign.

The Lib Dem puppet videos sought to win power rather than critique it; the same is true of Johnson's humour. Such top-down efforts arguably undermine the joy and function of joking. Humorous campaigns, by contrast, do what joking is celebrated for. They throw into question the dignity and legitimacy of those who seek power, and the very systems by which power is managed, distributed and won.

The problem with satirising the election

Journalists claimed it was the “most important election in a generation”, so their ability to provide balance and scrutiny was imperative in helping inform the public. But since the election period began, concerns were raised about “biased coverage” and the breaking of electoral law and broadcasting rules.

America has become well versed in some of the problems the UK is experiencing in its political news coverage and one of the ways they are tackling it is through the critical voice of TV satire. Over the last 20 years, satirists like Jon Stewart and John Oliver have become dominant social commentators who have taken the media to task for poor political news reporting and lambasted political institutions for their undemocratic policies. These figures have also been commended for their critical and context driven approach to news reporting that encourages audiences to question dominant political discourses.

While American TV satire’s sophisticated analysis of contemporary politics continues to grow, UK TV satire has been largely absent from our screens. In September, we were promised a new series of *Spitting Image* but it did not materialise in time for the General Election. BBC’s *The Mash Report* had an opportunity to provide a weekly satirical critique of party exploits and subsequent news coverage, yet it was nowhere to be seen. A staple of UK television satire – the trusted panel show format of *Have I Got News for You* was regularly aired but the programme just doesn’t exude the same level of critical and investigative flair found in US satirical platforms.

One of the reasons why the UK has not been able to master the US’s successful model of TV satire is the issue of due impartiality – a broadcast rule that ensures the news is reported in a fair and balanced manner. While TV satire might not fall under the definition of news, Ofcom’s *broadcasting rules* on ‘Elections and Referendums’ stipulates that “due impartiality must be maintained across all programmes giving coverage to the Election”.

This may explain why TV satire was so thin on the ground because the rules of election impartiality are not conducive to satire practice. Afterall, satire is meant to draw attention to the failings and vices of powerful figures but applying this strategy to all political parties for the sake of balance may not be applicable or funny, and could weaken its overall potency.

While the rules of impartiality have created a precarious media landscape for satirists and comedians, some have not been afraid to embrace this challenge. Take *The Last Leg*, Channel 4’s live, late-night comedy talk show. It might not be in the same league as US TV satire programmes like *Last Week Tonight* but its host, Adam Hills, confidently manoeuvred around broadcast rules and delivered a series of fourth estate inspired

stories on the General Election.

Drawing parallels with the democratic role of the news media and the citizen surrogate approach of many TV satire programmes, *The Last Leg* predominantly reported on stories that came directly from its audience who used the show’s Twitter hashtag #isitok? to raise topics of discussion. Such questions were used to unpack and discuss why Boris Johnson was taking part in soft interview programmes like *This Morning* but avoiding a much harder hitting interview with Andrew Neil.

Impartiality was a key feature in *The Last Leg*’s approach to critiquing the main party manifestos. While the show’s hosts agreed that Labour’s policies on broadband, and the 4-day working week had major benefits, they also debated Corbyn’s ability to sell good ideas given his low level of popularity with the electorate. The show also paid close attention to the Conservative manifesto and how the document had more pictures of Boris than disabled policies.

Neither of the main parties came off particularly well in the show’s weekly discussions. This is often the case with satire and political comedy, but it can be problematic as the tone of coverage could potentially encourage cynicism and apathy. *The Last Leg* attempts to overcome this issue by consistently promoting advocacy journalism strategies. In my article *Provoking the Citizen* I found that TV satirists are increasingly adopting this style of reporting to encourage citizen engagement in the political process. Throughout the election cycle the host, Adam Hills does just that by drawing the audiences’ attention to the importance of casting their vote.

There was potential in this General Election for more satirical voices to challenge and contextualise media and political discourses. But evidently, the rules of election impartiality created obstacles that prevented such voices from being heard. *The Last Leg* shows us that TV satire can overcome these issues by combining comedy with the conventions of normative journalism practice; specifically avoiding partisanship, holding power to account and prioritising the views and needs of the audience.



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Sounding Off: music and musicians' interventions in the 2019 election campaign



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When Tony Blair's former constituency of Sedgefield fell to the Conservatives for the first time since 1935, the Tory campaign headquarters blasted out 'Things Can Only Get Better', the theme song of his 1997 landslide victory. It harked back not only to a bygone electoral terrain, but a musical landscape long-gone.

2019's fragmented media landscape compared to Blair's musical and electoral heyday continued the trajectory away from keynote 'campaign songs'. But music was abundant even if, for much of the campaign, as a secondary feature in the messaging from the parties themselves. With a gamut of source genres and instrumental palettes – from plangent piano and strings, through guitar infused rock, to electronica – Party Election Broadcast music was largely relegated to underscore that could have easily sat within adverts, film trailers or corporate training videos.

This seemed partly related to the plethora of content, election broadcasts co-mingling with dozens of social media videos produced by parties, individual candidates and activist organisations. The increasing emphasis on social media meant a hunger for content – Momentum's production staff were supplemented by hundreds of volunteers – and the number of backing tracks required would always militate towards loops and small-scale production on a quick turnaround.

The online, referential, meme-aesthetic also drew from other media. Some of the more familiar musical interludes harked back to television – as in the SNPs use of music from Tony Hart's art programmes and *Countdown* – or Labour's sardonic underscoring of Boris Johnson interviews with snippets of Heinz Keissling's light entertainment music (better known now from the sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*). Copyright being a factor, library and public domain music were also features. Indeed, when Momentum spoofed a 1990s Coca Cola advert, they were subject to a cease and desist letter in short order. Inevitably, the December timing of the election played into its soundtrack. The culture of cross-references inflected 'Christmas themed' outputs, like the twinkles and bells of the SNP's take on *A Christmas Carol*, and the ostensibly diegetic sound of a portable stereo playing 'Silent Night' in the Conservatives' parody of *Love Actually*. Exemplifying the fast-moving, interconnected web of content across different types of producer, this was an idea lifted from Labour candidate Rosena Allin-Khan's video for her campaign in Tooting, and images of Johnson from the Tory advert were quickly repurposed to critique him.

But popular music culture beyond the fluidity of internet remixing loomed large via musicians' interventions. There were different levels of endorsement, such as Liam Gallagher's and Chris Martin's support in passing for the Greens and

Liberal Democrats, respectively. The large majority of artists who weighed in enthusiastically, however, did so for Labour or at least against the Conservatives, – as with Madness's dig at 'The Bullingdon Boys' – and from across the generic spectrum, up to and including the heart of the pop mainstream, in Little Mix. This added pop firepower to the closing stages of Labour's campaign. Emeli Sandé permitted the use of her song 'You Are Not Alone', while Clean Bandit released an emotive Radiohead cover, and Brian Eno an uncharacteristic comedy number, backing Labour.

Several parties promised support for music venues – tax cuts from the Conservatives, an examination of funding from the Liberal Democrats and a community-oriented pledge in Labour's 'Charter for the Arts'. This also drew on pop luminaries, its launch featuring Lily Allen, Sandé, MIA and Clean Bandit. If Ken Loach's role at the launch, given his previous controversial remarks on the history of the Holocaust being 'for all to discuss', was hardly likely to assuage Labour's tensions with the Jewish community, that fraught aspect of the campaign also highlighted the broader popular musical leaning towards Labour. A stark critique of Labour's record on anti-Semitism from literary and interfaith figures in *The Guardian* drew a response in the music press as the *NME* ran a letter with a host of both British and American musicians in addition to longstanding, habitual signatories of pro-Corbyn missives.

Shorn of household-name musical endorsements, the Conservatives tried to burnish their pop-cultural credentials. Boris Johnson cited the Rolling Stones and, somewhat oddly given their political emphasis, The Clash as his preferred listening while Michael Gove's attempt to parry Stormzy's support for Labour by tweeting the rapper's lyrics almost inevitably backfired and left him at the centre of a social media storm.

Labour's musical campaign emerged from an early glut of unremarkable background sound, woven through the now characteristic mixture of official and activist generated content, as the clear leader in terms of pop presence. Momentum's national co-ordinator claimed 70 million views for their videos, but the result revealed limitations to the rush of social media likes and stardust of popular musical acclaim. Musical culture and electoral culture are increasingly entangled, but the reliably effective deployment of the former in service of the latter seems some way off.

Stormzy, status, and the serious business of social media spats

When is a 'spat' more than just that? Like many other performers, Stormzy used Twitter and Instagram to implore followers to register to vote. While emphasising these were "MY views" and encouraging readers to do their own research, the rapper and singer made his own conclusions clear. Corbyn was "committed to giving power back to the people", while the prospect of continued premiership for a man who admitted nervousness on seeing a "bunch of black kids" was "extremely dangerous".

It didn't take long for a Conservative to be called on for a response to Stormzy's "sinister man" depiction of their leader. On talkRADIO Michael Gove claimed Stormzy had made his "political views" clear by wearing a "stab vest" on stage at Glastonbury. "All I would say", Gove concluded, "is that he's a far, far better rapper than he is political analyst". When Labour's Angela Rayner retorted that Gove was "crap at both" Gove curiously co-opted Stormzy's own lyrics to clap back, tweeting: "I set trends dem man copy".

While this "embarrassing" episode in the campaign seems surreal it's not something new, and not just because we have previously been subjected to Gove rapping. This 'spat' and the media commentary around it feels like a familiar form of boundary policing, questioning whether a celebrity has the status to make political statements. We also saw this explicitly in 2015 with David Cameron's dismissal of comedian Russell Brand as "a joke", something he made emphatically clear that electoral politics was not. Gove's use of Stormzy's lyrics to double down on dismissing his political knowledge reinforces the sense it is not just that he is a celebrity that matters, nor a musician, but a *rapper*.

I have argued that celebrities' status in the political field is grounded in claims to represent citizens. Being seen to speak to a large audience – for example when spikes in voter registration among younger people were attributed to Stormzy – is most important for working class celebrities associated with genres attributed lower cultural capital. While Michael Gove appears to have some liking for rap we can assume he and Stormzy disagree on many things, one of these being what "political views" Stormzy was signalling by wearing Banksy's Union Jack stab vest at Glastonbury.

But it is broader perceptions of what Stormzy represents – what he speaks *for*, and who he speaks *to* – that make this spat something more meaningful. While *The Guardian's* Jonathan Jones argued Stormzy spoke "for England" at Glastonbury he is generally not seen to have such generic reach, nor to speak for some faceless group demonstrated through social media stats. Stormzy routinely does what is often demanded of celebrities who talk politics: he puts his money where his mouth is. The Stormzy Scholarship supports black students

to study at Cambridge, and he has emphasised the importance of using the word "black" rather than framing awardees euphemistically as "underprivileged". His #Merky Books collaboration with Penguin publishes the stories of young writers "that are not being heard", and the description of his own book proclaims him "a true spokesman of black empowerment". Stormzy makes continued connections across multiple social fields to a community he is seen to represent, a constituency that is largely young, black, and excluded from formal politics.

Beyond Stormzy, in this election we continued to see celebrity used to draw battle lines between the two main rivals. While as in 2017 celebrity endorsements were not at the core of Labour's campaign, their Instagram feed showcased several famous faces in the final days. Labour candidates also continued to accept celebrity support on the campaign trail, even if this time it was often tactically anti-Tory. The Conservatives in contrast continued to be a celebrity-free zone; aside, of course, from their leader. But the divide established in 2015 continues, as the Conservatives distance themselves from celebrity while seeking to undermine the authority of Labour's star supporters. Here Gove's comments can be seen in broader context: following the 2015 election he joked that those who had seen celebrities as "the voices of the silent majority" had been proven "marvellously, and hilariously, wrong".

The use of Stormzy to make a point about political authority in this campaign may have deeper implications than previous celebrity spats. Reflecting after polling day, Stormzy argued "you're just a rapper" is a "weaponised tactic" to "reduce us to whatever they need us to be and dismiss it". Whether the celebrity divide continues into future elections, this particular dismissal may reinforce perceptions of who there is and is not a place for in electoral politics.



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Section 5 - Boris truck, The Conservative Party

Section 6 - Labour Actually - Dr Rosena Allin-Khan Tooting, Labour Party political advert

Section 7 - Climate Change Debate, Channel 4 News broadcast

Section 8 - Boris Pinocchio, Picture by: Matt Brown, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/londonmatt/>
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POLLING STATION

OPENING TIMES

7.00am–10.00pm

Note that as long as you are in the polling station, or in a queue outside, before 10.00pm you will be entitled to apply for a ballot paper



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